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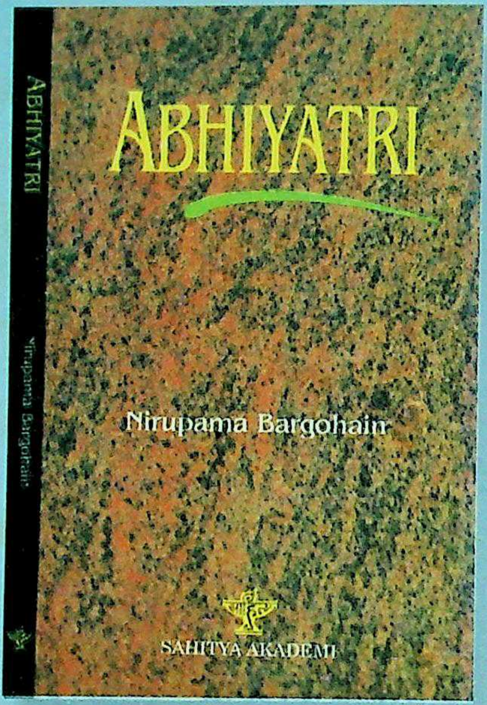
HIGHLIGHTS

Biographical Writings

In Memoriam : K.S. Narasimha Swamy
Nissim Ezekiel

New Releases from Sahitya Akademi

Abhiyatri by Nirupama Bargohain



Abhiyatri is based on the astonishing life of Chandraprabha Saikiani, one of the pioneers in the field of social activism, especially the rights of women. She emerged from the misty obscurity of a remote Assamese village to register many triumps for the oppressed and the victimized, including persecuted women like herself. As the author shows, this gutsy character was humanized by her frailties, contradictions and desires. By plunging into the narrative the reader sees how Chandraprabha transcends her personal grief, especially a frustrated love affair and the burden of being a single mother, to become a significant presence in the socio-political landscape of Assam.

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Dear Reader,

Geography is about maps
But biography is about chaps

— so said E.C. Bentley, attempting a witty description of biography. Always a popular genre, biography has become one of the most immediate and accessible modes of writing about public figures and literary giants. But it is this popularity which raises some disturbing questions too. The problematic, delightful, and disputed nature of biography derives from the original unholy alliance between fact and fiction. Let us consider for a moment the extraordinary divergence in the form. The two most successful biographies in the English language to date are probably James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), which has never been out of print for 200 years; and Andrew Morton's *Diana: Her True Story* (1992), 'including a new chapter and 28 new photographs', which has already sold two and-a-half million copies world-wide! We have to consider too the different kinds of portraiture, the different modes of inward life, achieved in those works. While Boswell enters with unforgettable empathy and metaphoric daring into Johnson's inner world of moral struggle, Morton follows the tradition of gossip, of aristocratic scandal and of piquant anecdote. Hence the disturbing question: Is biography so widely read for popular, 'prurient' reasons, or for reputable, intellectual reason? The fact that the pronounced interest in biography presently prevailing among Western readers is commercially exploited on such a large scale by publishers and writers, professional or non-professional, is reason enough for us to be self-critical. There is hardly a list of best-sellers without biographical items; most significantly, the subjects chosen as a rule are film-stars and sportsmen on the one hand and politicians, generals and business tycoons on the other. In the way of presentation, there is an emphasis on the sensational, on the intimate aspects of the subject's life, a relish in washing dirty linen (which has little to do with Dr. Johnson's insistence on 'truth') – the biographer posing as a detective, with voyeur curiosity serving as prime motivation. It is in these symptoms that Lothar Lutze found justification enough to call this age 'The Age of Indiscreet Biography'.

Dryden defined biography as the 'history of particular men's lives'. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines it more scientifically, as a "form of non-fictional literature, the subject of which is the life of an individual". *Oxford English Dictionary* annotates it almost similarly as "The history of lives of individual men as a branch of literature." Biography can, then, be seen as a branch of history, since it depends on a selective ordering and interpretation of materials, written or oral, established through research and personal recollection. It can also be seen as a branch of imaginative literature in that it seeks to convey a sense of individuality and significance of the subject through creative sympathetic insight. It is therefore understandable that a biographer is not always neutral but discloses aspects of his own personality in the presentation and interpretation of the biographee.

The origins of biography are no doubt to be found in the early accounts of monarchs and heroes; for example, in the Old Testament stories, in the Greek, Celtic and Scandinavian epics and sagas; or in Banabhatta's well-known Sanskrit work, *Harṣacarita* (7th Century A.D.). The sayings of wise and holy men can also be seen as rudiments of biography, as we can learn a lot about Socrates, for instance, from Plato's teachings and from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*; or about Lord Buddha from Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita* in Sanskrit. However, the Roman historian Plutarch was perhaps the pioneer of the form. His *Parallel Lives* (1st Century A.D.) covered twenty-three Greeks and twenty-three Romans, arranged in pairs and proved an important source of plots for many plays, including some by Shakespeare.

The modern biography as a distinct genre evolved in 17th century England when beyond the lives of kings and saints, a few vernacular lives of individuals were considered worthy of focus. The trend began with William Roper's *Life of Thomas More* (1626) and culminated in Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), which combines detailed records of conversation and behaviour with considerable psychological insight. This provided the model for exhaustive, monumental 19th century biographies such as A.P. Stanley's *Life of Arnold* and Lord Marley's *Gladstone*. Carlyle's conviction that history was the history of great men demonstrated the general belief of the time that biographical writing was an important method of understanding society and its institutions.

In his Introduction to K.M. George's *Comparative Indian Literature* (*V-I*) M.K. Naik analyses the development of modern biographical writing in India thus:

> With the spread of Western education in India from the mid-19th century, biography, like prose fiction,

K.S.Na: The Heart-Bee Has Flown... Do not Ask Me Where

(1915-2003)

H.S. Shiva Prakash

The heart-bee has flown
From flower to flower...
Don't ask me: "Where?"

The bee flitting from flower to flower. Self moving from youth to old age. The tenant moving from house to house. The unanswered questions travelling from epoch to epoch…such images of evanescence are the stuff of the poetry of KS Narasimha Swamy, one of the most loved and lovable of Kannada poets, who died recently. Unlike his immediate predecessors in Kannada poetry, Bendre, Kuvempu and Pu Ti Narasimhachar, KSNa, as he was referred to by lovers of his incomparable poetry, never donned prophetic robes. He never sought "to open the eyes of a generation" like his great contemporary, Adiga. Neither did he suffer from obsessions of aesthetic or political ideology like his younger modernist and protest writers. His idiom was everyday speech. His concerns were little joys and sorrows of everyday life, its changing hues and tones.

The clarity and simplicity of KSNa's poetry was hard-won. As a poet he had forged his idiom through deep understanding of his favourite masters in Sanskrit, Kannada and English. One thing common to all his favourite poets in different languages was earthiness, simplicity and great economy of expression. Valmiki was his favourite from Sanskrit. He once spoke to me at length quoting elaborately from the *Ramayana* trying to impress on me the need for economy and simplicity of expression. In English, his favourites were Burns and Louis Mac Niece. He was in correspondence with Mac Niece and exchanged notes with him for some time. He shared with Burns the celebration of the ordinary. His ancestors in Kannada, apart from the great Vachana and folk poets, were Kumaravyasa and Sarvjna, two great masters of everyday idiom. Even in his modernist phase, he shunned free-verse for the most part. He always preferred to find freedom in the confines of simple meters like the quatrain so close to everyday speech and song.

To say that KSNa celebrated the ordinary does not mean that there was anything commonplace about his poetry. Far from it. He had the unusual genius of uncovering the extra-ordinary side of the ordinary. "You are looking at the shut window and asking me what and how of it. It seems a philosophy is hidden there. But there is no quiet in my heart now" he says in the poem "Muchchida Kitaki' (Shut Window). In another famous poem, "Kavite Huttuva Samaya" (The Hour of Poetry's Birth) says KSNa:

> Each word hides a whole history in it.
> But I could not get down to its roots.

Simple objects like windows and doors, like everyday vocabulary, shut off and open out into deep mysteries in his poetry. For the most part, he was transparent in word and style. He arranged common words in ways that make us smell ethereal fragrances in them.

His first book of poems was *Mysuru Mallige* named after fragrant jasmines so popular and universal in Karnataka. It is an all-time best-seller of Kannada poetry. It was not just a literary classic, but had become an integral part of Kannada culture. For several decades it was the most popular wedding present to be given to the newly wed. For KSNa, the uses of poetry were important. Once he was asked by a young modern and progressive critic what use was his Romantic love poetry for a society full of exploitation. Said KSNa: "Go to Dharwar bus stand. You will find there a blind beggar who earns his alms by singing a song everyday. That's his only means of livelihood. I asked him if he knows the name of the poet. He said he didn't. It was my song he was singing. I didn't bother to tell him the song was mine. My poetry has made no revolutions. But it has given daily bread to one poor beggar." His words were full of disarming simplicity so rare in the age of grand rhetoric.

Mysuru Mallige was a collection of unprecedented love songs. It was deeply indebted to Kannada folk lyrics for imagery and rhythms. But it also had the English kind of economy of expression learnt from BMSri's English *Geethegalu* one of the shaping influences on 20th century Kannada poetry. It was very unlike traditional folk love, which mostly celebrates extra-marital forbidden apples. KSNa's

> gained a distinct identity. Now written in prose, it was liberated from the conventions and attitudes which the employment of verse as a medium of expression had inevitably imposed upon it for centuries. Unfortunately, the model immediately available to the early Western-educated Indian biographer was the British Victorian biography, which Lytton Strachey has justly pilloried as 'Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them?—with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design'.

It was thus a case, at least initially, of exchanging the King Log of ancient hagiography for the King Stork of Victorian whitewash, although, as the 20th century progressed, the Indian biographer's art did mature, though slowly.

Our highlight in this issue is this maturing of biographical writing. We have included excerpts in English or in English translation from eight great biographies which won the Sahitya Akademi Award; in addition to these, there are excerpts from three more works viz. Hali's *Yadgár-e-Ghálib* (Urdu), Pranati Mukhopadhyay's *Kshitimohan Sen* (Bangla) and P.K. Parameswaran Nair's *C.V.Raman Pillai* (Malayalam). We have supplemented this rich fare with Alokeranjan Dasgupta's perceptive piece "Biography: A Māyā? The Indian Point of Departure" and Jean-Marc Hovasse's "On Writing Victor Hugo's Biography," which is a classic record of the methodology adopted in writing a great biography. As a matter of fact, Jean-Marc Hovasse was in India last year and read this paper in Sahitya Akademi as a part of the celebration of Victor Hugo's second birth centenary.

In the Nobel Prize presentation lecture 2003, J.M. Coetzee has been described as "a post-modern allegorist" and a writer who "knows that novels that do not seek to mimic reality best convince us that reality exists." The citation goes on to analyse: "Coetzee sees through the obscene poses and false pomp of history, lending voice to the silenced and the despised. Restrained but stubborn, he defends the ethical value of poetry, literature and imagination. Without them, we blinker ourselves and become bureaucrats of the soul." Against such effusive praises, what does Coetzee do in the presentation ceremony? Most distinguished writers, bidden to compose a Nobel Prize acceptance speech, usually confine themselves to polite remarks about the nature of literature and the duties of the artist charged with creating it. But Coetzee opted to file one of the devious little metafictional fragments of which his own fiction seems increasingly to consist. He called it "He and his man."

Coetzee's interest in the elusive figure of Daniel Defoe goes all the way back to his fourth novel *Foe* (1986). Supposedly narrated by a woman named Susan Barton, who arrived on Cruso's (always eliding the "e" for some reason) island where he and Friday were already ensconced, this features a number of letters to the equally elusive figure of "Mr. Foe", who may or may not write a book about their adventure. Coetzee's Nobel acceptance speech looks to be dealing with this engagement with Defoe, Crusoe and the perennially enticing metaphor of the island, to the amazement of all present. It is this unpredictability that makes Coetzee unique. Every new book by Coetzee is astonishingly unlike his others. He intrudes into the uninhabited spaces of his readers. In his autobiographical writings, he pitilessly ransacks his former selves. In his recently published essay-novel *Elizabeth Costello*, he combines, with uninhibited humour and irony, contemporary narrative and myth, philosophy and gossip.

On the occasion of Coetzee's winning Nobel Prize, we present an article titled "Prophet of Pain – J.M. Coetzee and his Novel *Disgrace*," by Ranajit Das, a close and committed reader of Coetzee. He shows how in the dystopian novel *Disgrace*, David Lurie does not achieve creativity and freedom until, stripped of all dignity, he is afflicted by his own shame and history's disgrace. In this work, Coetzee virtually summarises his themes: race and gender, ownership and violence, and the moral and political complicity of everyone in that borderland where the languages of liberation and reconciliation carry to meaning.

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

love poems were marital love poems. They depicted the first fever of married love in the context of a middle class family which was no more a joint family. The beauty of the nights of love in the early stages of wedded life, the poignancy of the husband's longing for the wife when she is away at her parent's house, the thrill of pregnancy and childbirth—these made up the scenes of the book. The book became popular not just because of its subtle stylistic beauty but because it spoke of the changing hues of man-woman relationship in the new sociological set-up. KSNa had expressed the new sensibility in a new idiom.

KSNa's mode remained more or less the same till the challenge of modernism was thrown at him by the new poetry of Adiga. The transition is clear in his tour de force, "Shilalate" (The Stone-creeper), which, as the title indicates, deals with the struggle between the old and the new. One of the most remarkable poems of this period was "Gadiyaaradangadiya Munde" (In Front of the Clock-shop) a sur-realistic meditation on time, a truly avant-garde work. He wrote only a small number of poems in this mode, including "Kunuva Hennu" (Dancing Girl), but it didn't develop into his major mode.

KSNa's masterpiece is his *Tereda Bagilu*, a book that came after years of silence. This is comparable to Kumar Gandharva's long silence near the Hill of Devi before he burst into the new phase of his musical creativity. The book is a collection of poetic meditations on time and aging, at once simple and profound. Unlike Adiga's poems, these poems are deeply personal in tone though a far cry from his early love poems. This work is perhaps KSNa's greatest contribution to Kannada poetic tradition. After this, he continued to bring out books of poems, but there was no major breakthrough.

The title poem itself is a magnificent dramatic monologue. The aged love-poet's wife is away at her parents' house. The poet is bitterly alone. It is already late evening when a relative from the in-laws' house arrives. The poet engages the visitor in a casual conversation. The poem gradually develops into a profound meditation on evanescence, aging and fear of death. All this is done without giving up the conversational ease or sense of humour.

It is interesting to compare KSNa with Adiga, his great contemporary. Both these giants of Kannada poetry started writing in the Navodaya style and then were exposed to the challenge of modernism. Adiga was a conscious innovator. He was carrying the burden of tradition and change. His early poetry was full of millennial hopes. This gave way, after Independence, to the trauma of mobocracy. KSNa was aware of these things, but they mattered much less to him. He too wrote poems about the bankruptcy of the new democracy.

The poem, "Comforting Empty Pots" is precisely about this:

> The dry tap is comforting empty pots
> On a scorching hot afternoon
> Not a single head on the street-
> Just the sun!
>
> Lifeless and unfortunate, the eternal blue sky
> (Of night we talked at night. But what about now?)
> Not a single cloud or an iota of peace. Rama, Rama!

Of these things, KSNa never spoke with Adiga's prophetic zeal. He always spoke as an ordinary but sensitive citizen. Adiga spoke of the past with great passion. KSNa just dismissed it:

> This hell has no green, no wetness, and no breath.
> And this tree is all sapless
> No bird lives in it.
> No monkey tugs at it
> What an immortal pose!
> It has become sapless sucking a hundred springs,
> This covering of generations of snakes
> Who wants its friendship?
> It is better that the whirlwind blows
> And makes it fall

KSNa never spoke of socialism in poetry but he was being socialist in poetry. The utopias of past and future meant nothing to him. His concern was to make the present livable and lovely. He was like the tenant who figures prominently in his later poetry. The tenant doesn't settle down but makes the house livable. For KSNa, all the world is a home of this kind. He built his own simple mythology around the home. The proprietor-God has not much concern about us. But the mother-Nature is caring. In KSNa's poetry, mothering is much more important than fathering as is clear from his poem "Idadiru Nanna Ninna Simhasanada Mele" (Don't Put Me on Your Throne, Please)

In short, we love and suffer, live and die, come and go. Only Mother lives on, protecting us and the entire world. KSNa's world is the one where Mother dominates, not the father, like in Adiga's poetry. Death is painful but it is also a lot of fun in KSNa's poems for it gives things not just evanescence but also beauty. His world is that of the moon and his language one of jasmines, tender but enduring, small but invaluable. All this makes him unique and unusual in the context of 20th century Kannada poetry, a scene of bloody masculist struggles in language.

Let me bow down to KSNa, the departed lover of earth, sky, clouds and flowers with the last stanzas of the poem, "Kelabeda Ellige" (Don't Ask Me: Where?). The stanza with which I began this essay is the first from the same poem. The poem can also be seen as his farewell by the poet of transitions and transience to the world of evanescent splendour:

Shall I too smile with you?
But someone seems to call me
As if someone put the finger on the lip
And stopped me

How you smile, O love,
Jasmines all over your hair!
Shall I leave now?
Don't ask me: Where?

❑

K.S. Narasimha Swamy

The Open Door

Evening is here. So are you.
You could get the bus on the market day?
How could you come when it is so dark?
Tell me when is your child's naming day?
How is she? When is she coming?
I know she will surely come, but when?
The paddy must have been beaten by now.
They must have got the cart too.
But maybe there is the famine of bullocks....The reason:
This time too Father's shraadham ceremony is on Saturday.
Even if no paddy comes in, let some plantains come.
Your coming is good. Very good.
Everyone's fine back home?

The drizzle has stopped, but the cold has increased.
Come in and see if there is some coffee in the flask.
Why so many clothes and a shawl besides?
Are you a monkey or a bear my dear?
Fold your star-umbrella and put it in the corner.
No one will steal your chappals here.
Is the old chair and mat very dirty?
Yes, so is everything here and everything that comes here.

Excuse me. Can you hear me?
Is it wrong for my door to be on the street's edge?
Is it wrong for it to be open?
I am the open door no matter what season comes.

Yes, my dear. Good, good you are here.
At least, we are two of us now.

Another half-hour to go for dinner from a hotel.
Till then let me tell you my story.
Not quite the story, but whatever I saw
before the open-door.
Whatever I did
I'm telling you, listen.

What are you saying?
"Is the heart a fig-fruit we can open?"
Who asked you to lay bare the soul?
That has to wait till we die.
The most we can is to take off the shirt
rid yourselves of burdens and layers.
I was not completely up in the morning when
the newspaper boy came in, with news for me—
an accident on the third page!
Someone of my name and street
run over by a lorry.
(Don't criticize news for being prosaic;
people can die in prose too)
Nobody ever knew he was alive.
His death was big news.
On my head the sky collapsed.
I knew for sure I was not the one who died.
Still I peered into the mirror,
jerked my legs, stretched my limbs, got up and walked.
I drove a nail into the threshold
Pity! Looking at my clenched fist
I said I will remove the blame
that came to my name when someone died.
Wearing a washed dhoti I rushed to the bathroom
when taps were about to stop flowing.
Had a sacred bath in the water left
I lit a ghee lamp for the dead.
I bowed down to God offering stolen flowers.
The lizard on the wall was gazing at me.
I was not looking for the omens it offered.
Completely helpless I rushed next-door,
said on the phone: "Give me the editor."
She was stuttering: "Speak, Sir."
"Namaskar to you, Sir, not one but two.
One surely for you,
another for the realm you have assigned my name to.

Not your mistake, true,
still the matter is serious, Sir."
The sun and the moon are my witnesses.
"No more the moon's witness.
The sun alone is my witness
I'm alive. Could you put in a correction?"
"Is that so? Sorry. Fine. We will do that tomorrow
We will tell everyone you are alive."
What calm! What contentment! Rama! Rama!
The knife went, my child, but the dagger came:
The memory of condolence letters wearing black saris and tear-flowers.

Panicked
I ran straight to the post-office
and looked at the seals on cards and envelopes
Out came a guiltless one.
Stopping him, telling him all, I said:
"Whatever mail comes till tomorrow evening
let it keep lying here.
I will come myself and take it.
If you can kindly do me this kindness,
not just me, but my wife and my children
will be grateful."
I don't know what happened.
Saying, "You are a crack,"
to the street he fled
shaking his head

On my way back I trod on a thorn.
It bled. Her memory came.
It's almost a month since she went home.
Paddy has not arrived, neither has she.
It's the same trouble with all wives having parents' house.
Let her come whenever she wants to, I thought.
But – try to understand the next thing
in today's context. Understand? So,
the first thing in the morning before the crowing of the crow,
I dispatched Subbu in the very first bus.
At least before midnight, I hope, they will come
I have done all I could have done
And am sitting, waiting before the open door.
"Saptamam daiva chintanam"
You did not meet her in the village

You came here straight without information.
Good for me, on both counts.
Only the good happens to us.

Where was I?
When I came home at noon it was terribly hot.
I had a splitting headache, yet I had head all right!
And a stomach filled with hunger.
Oh! The fragrance of asafoetida from the kitchen next-door –
The breeze's kindness.
It was too late for the hotel food.
You know who came, then?
Like three fires, three times
like three incarnations of the merits of three generations,
three hungry people cleanly dressed,
seeing the open door they came straight in.
The maid-servant is on leave today;
seeing no Rangoli at the threshold,
they got wrong ideas and just walked in.

Or may be because
all streets have now been beautified
Plants, grown on either side
Flower-beds in the traffic circles and squares.
Old gutters have been fortified.
It is so tough to recognize streets,
pulling up the earth's skin, driving in the water taps
covering them with red cloth, the workers have gone away.
Anyone can lose the way now.
Had they come to the wrong house on the wrong street?
Such were my worries. They too were doubtful:
Where have we come to? Where, next?
Standing on the mat they looked at the clock.
The deer was hungry, so was the tiger.
They looked at the open door. I stopped them.
After the rituals of 'how are you?'
the sunken object came out of the well.
11 was the number of the other house – the same as that of this house,
only the street was different – the one at the back, my dear
I showed them the window of the house.
I touched my ears and made excuses and bowed down
"Live a hundred years," blessing me with immortal mantras

the guests went away,
who came like three fires and three times.
So fifty years were gone, but another fifty remains —
just fine for my needs, I said.
Still, the ocean; still, the sky
still, the earth I stood on.
I saw them cross the open door,
the floor was littered with sacred rice
Shanti Shanti Shanti.

At the Railway Station

"Where are you Meena?"
        Just here, Ma.
"The cradle, box and bed?"
        Just here, Ma.

"Forgotten something, have you?"
        How ever can I?
"Remembering something, are you?"
        The way I am, that's it

"Got hot water, Meena
        For the baby's milk powder?"
Lots and lots of it,
        in the eyes too a lot more

"Hold the baby there
        so I put a dot on its forehead
The body is so hot,
        you are just about to leave!"

The tolling bells. The whistle.
        The waving flag
The train's body shaken
        by the frightened lamp.

Don't come along with the window,
        please go back, Ma.
I fold my hands from here
        bless me from where you are

Spreading down along the rails
    the engine's screech
"Where are you Meena?
    Where are you? Tell me."

Amidst spark-filled smoke
    huge wheels roll
I am right here, Ma
    just here.

"Shut the window Meena
    Sparks may fly in."
I have shut the window, Ma
    no spark can fly in.

Translated from Kannada by H.S. Shiva Prakash

❑

Nissim Ezekiel: A Personal Memoir

(1924-2004)

Keki N. Daruwalla

Regrettably the phrase "great loss" is not strictly appropriate for Nissim Ezekiel's passing away on January 9 this year, for we who number ourselves among his friends, had lost him once Alzheimer's got a stranglehold on him over three years back. The disease had taken away one of the finest minds in the country and a poet who changed the face of modern Indian poetry in English.

Ezekiel would have been embarrassed to hear him described as a guiding light on the cultural scene in Bombay. But that is what he very nearly was. Anyone could go to him with problems—literary or artistic and expect an answer. But he was far from the pompous Indian guru—Indian gurus are pompous, aren't they? (Personally I find the Guru-Shishya relationship very embarrassing and so have never entered into it, either as acolyte or as mentor). He never brushed anyone off, was never facetious, and was always concerned about the other person. Few people were as clear-headed as him. And he was forthright in his comments, but never rude.

Even as fine a poet as Dom Moraes has acknowledged his debt to Ezekiel. Dom was in his teens then, and though Dom's talent (close to genius) was undoubted, a worthwhile dialogue with a senior can only help.

I sent some poems (I wrote appallingly those days) to Nissim in 1964 from Joshimath where I was stationed then. Though he wrote back politely, he did say, and very rightly too "as far as the poems are concerned there is nothing much to say." Joshimath was an absolute wilderness then—we got electricity for just four hours a day, the Border Roads people blasted away at the hills ten hours a day in their attempt to construct a road till Badrinath and Mana, and the winter winds howled and whined around the tin shed that was my house. I am not easily discouraged. Moreover Robert Graves saw a poem of mine in a magazine and wrote to me on his own, and that sustained me. (Incidentally, that was an equally rudderless poem and I don't, for the life of me, know what the great man saw in it)!

Two years later I went to Bombay (it was not Mumbai then, thankfully) and met Nissim in his office—he was the editor of *Imprint* then and Neera Benegal, Shyam's wife, was his secretary. Nissim showed me Gieve Patel's book which he had just published. This time when I showed him my poems, I was astonished at his enthusiasm. He wanted to publish a collection by me! That never worked, because Nissim was putting his own money in and he must have run short. He was to sink his money in *Poetry India* as well, one of the finest poetry magazines we have ever had, for, apart from English, it carried some very fine translations from other Indian languages. One first read Ka Na Subramaniam and Vinda Karandikar in *Poetry India*. I think he brought out six issues and then ran out of money and possibly, energy.

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During Khushwant Singh's editorship of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Nissim coaxed him to start a poetry page, which Nissim edited. He included every young versifier here, including me. Those days anything in *The Weekly*, as it was called, made you famous, for no one read anything else. Later, Kamala Das was to take over the page from Ezekiel. When my first book came out, he, on his own, reviewed it very generously for the Sunday edition of the *Times of India*—the Sunday edition then was far better than it is now and was not cluttered up with pin-ups traversing the ramp, their hips going sideways with each step they take. As for my second book, he reviewed it along with A.K.Ramanujan's second volume, *Relations*, and wrote generously about both of us in the *Illustrated Weekly*. Not many young writers are lucky enough to get such a boost. These days I notice, poets don't often review each other.

As a poet with no tradition whatever to fall back upon, Ezekiel's first task was to strike out a new path. Almost a decade and a half before Ramanujan came on the scene, he had to invent almost a new poetry in the Indian context, concentrate on the "intricate/ and bizarre ways of the heart," and bring into his poetry, as he worded it quaintly, "the dance of the self." He had to ask the Lord for "grapes and figs/ And metaphors," condemn the pedant (in a poem under the same name)

But he is rigid, barricaded from
The force of flower or bird by what he reads.
The word is now become a Chinese Wall...

The earlier poets had left no legacy except of vacuity. It is bad form to quote from one's own book, but I had said in my anthology on Indian poetry in English, "What Indian poetry needed (in the fifties) was someone whose writing approximated to the demands of the present-day world, who could bring into play a modern sensibility in confronting the confusion, bewilderment and disillusion of the times, someone who could transfer poetry from its bucolic habitat to an urban one, dump archaisms and the monotonous jangling rhymes of the earlier poets and adopt a form which could adequately display the subtle modulations of the pace and strength and the sinews of free verse." The answer of course was Nissim. Talking of the anthology, he helped me no end, carrying on a ceaseless correspondence with me on the subject. When Penguin asked me for an anthology in the mid-eighties, he recommended a whole lot of young poets.

Much later he was to write in a poem "A Different Way"

Whatever my theories
in practice I behave like a drug-addict
whose drugs are work, sensuality
poetry and the dance of the self.

Sensuality? Yes, ladies, especially in the culture world, fell in love with him. And when he went to America he was charmed by LSD. In a fit of enthusiasm he wrote to me "LSD is God." And he asked me if I wanted some. He could put it on the reverse of the stamps and I could lick it. I said no thanks Pal, I ain't gonna lick no stamps!

Whenever I met him at the P.E.N. office at the Theosophy Hall, he would take me for a coffee and at times for a meal at a vegetarian restaurant across the street. (He wrote a funny poem on an Irani restaurant.) As time went on he became more and more witty and even at poetry readings read more of his humorous stuff. In 1988 or perhaps 1989, I arranged a poetry reading for him and Kathleen Raine at the Indian High Commission. We had a fine audience consisting of poets, professors, publishers. We followed up the reading with a cocktail. It's an evening I'll remember, though Raine complained to me later on that Ezekiel had read too many funny poems! What is surprising is she had never heard of Nissim earlier—shows how little even Indophiles know of Indian poetry. Tragically, both have died within months of each other.

When he came to Delhi on work, he stayed at the India International Centre and then moved into our house—we used to stay at Bharatinagar then. He was always in his golf shoes and cotton pants, which got baggier with time. I believe he could have been better looked after in his later days, but neither his friends nor his family (at times estranged) perhaps realized that Alzheimer's was creeping on to him steadily. But one should remember him for what he was in his heyday, carefree, witty, self-effacing, tremendously versatile and well-read and blessed with a rapier sharp intellect. But most of all he was a gifted poet and a genuine friend.

❑

Nissim Ezekiel

Poverty Poem

She paused when the coffee came,
thanked the waiter, and said:
'I passed him by, of course,
poor child, he held my eyes,
sitting still, almost naked,
small and slightly bent, alone.'

We sipped the coffee, found it good.

'Before he released me,
he smiled and I smiled back,
I turned and gave him a coin,
past belief in that or anything.'

She didn't know beggars in India
smile only at white foreigners.

'Indians are a friendly people, anyway,'
she said. 'So they are,' I agree,
'so they are.' She stares at me
dubiously. I listen to the buzzing air.

Perhaps she thinks it best
not to argue. I think so too.

Jewish Wedding in Bombay

Her mother shed a tear or two but wasn't really
crying. It was the thing to do, so she did it,
enjoying every moment. The bride laughed when I
sympathised, and said don't be silly.

Her brothers hid a shoe of mine and made me pay
to get it back. The game delighted all the neighbours'
children, who never stopped staring at me, the reluctant
bridegroom of the day.

There was no dowry because they knew I was 'modern'
and claimed to be modern too. Her father asked me how
much jewellery I expected him to give away with his daughter.
When I said I didn't know, he laughed it off.

There was no brass band outside the synagogue
but I remember a chanting procession or two, some rituals,
lots of skull-caps, felt hats, decorated shawls,
and grapejuice from a common glass for bride and bridegroom.

I remember the breaking of that glass and the congregation
clapping which signified that we were well and truly married
according to the Mosaic Law.

Well, that's about all. I don't think there was much
that struck me as solemn or beautiful. Mostly, we were
amused, and so were the others. Who knows how much belief
we had?

Even the most orthodox, it was said, ate beef because it
was cheaper, and some even risked their souls by relishing pork.
The Sabbath was for betting and swearing and drinking.

Nothing extravagant, mind you, all in a low key,
and very decently kept in check. My father used to say,
these orthodox chaps certainly know how to draw the line
in their own crude way. He himself had drifted into the liberal
creed but without much conviction, taking us all with him.
My mother was very proud of being 'progressive'.

Anyway, as I was saying, there was that clapping, and later
we went into the photographic studio of Lobo and Fernandes,
world-famous specialists in wedding portraits. Still later,
we lay on a floor-mattress in the kitchen of my wife's
family apartment and though it was past midnight, she
kept saying let's do it darling let's do it darling
so we did it.

More than ten years passed before she told me that she remembered being very disappointed. Is that all there is to it? She had wondered. Back from London eighteen months earlier, I was horribly out of practice.

During our first serious marriage quarrel she said Why did you take my virginity from me? I would gladly have returned it, but not one of the books I had read instructed me how.

From "Very Indian Poems in Indian English"

The Professor

Remember me? I am Professor Sheth.
Once I taught you geography. Now
I am retired, though my health is good.
My wife died some years back.
By God's grace, all my children
Are well settled in life.
One is Sales Manager,
One is Bank Manager,
Both have cars.
Other also doing well, though not so well.
Every family must have black sheep.
Sarala and Tarala are married,
Their husbands are very nice boys.
You won't believe but I have eleven grandchildren.
How many issues you have? Three?
That is good. These are days of family planning.
I am not against. We have to change with times.
Whole world is changing. In India also
We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.
Old values are going, new values are coming.
Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.
I am going out rarely, now and then
Only, this is price of old age
But my health is O.K. Usual aches and pains.
No diabetes, no blood pressure, no heart attack.
This is because of sound habits in youth.
How is your health keeping?
Nicely? I am happy for that.
This year I am sixty-nine

and hope to score century.
You were so thin, like stick,
Now you are man of weight and consequence.
That is good joke.
If you are coming again this side by chance,
Visit please my humble residence also.
I am living just on opposite house's backside.

From the poem "Latter-day Psalms"

IV

Is the Lord my Shepherd?
Shall I not want?

I lie down in green pastures, beside
the still waters. Lead me
away from these into thy
work.

When my soul is restored,
I walk the path of self-
righteousness.

I *do* fear evil: thy rod
and thy staff *do* comfort
me.

Let not my table be prepared
in the presence of anybody.
I do not need a cup that
runneth over.

I shall not expect goodness
and mercy all the days of
my life, even if I dwell
in the house of the Lord.

V

Cast off, scattered for a
thousand years, where shall
we live in peace with our
neighbours?

Hard things seen, drinking
the wine of astonishment,
we are still outside the
strong city.

The end is not yet.

Vain is the help of man,
and vain everything else.
Did none pray who was ca-
ught in the Holocaust?

It is nowhere said by King
David that God is on the
side of the big battalions.
Philistia triumphs because of thee,
or, by an irony, over thee.

We do valiantly, and so do
our enemies.

From the poem "Edinburgh Interlude"

XXVIII

Nothing to Say

The end of another
trip abroad,
with little to show for it,
perhaps, except
the usual surprises of living,
with the good and rough weather
of love alternating this time
in Edinburgh,
with a Festival to remember
when I have nothing to say.

I know I shall say it
gratefully, as persistent and poetic
as the grass that grows
between Bombay's pavement tiles.

❑

Scholar Extraordinary

Nirad C. Chaudhuri

Chapter 2

Life, Love and Death

From all the accounts that Max Müller gave of his intellectual aims, methods and work it could be seen that he was less a scholar in the strict sense of the word than an intellectual, and the difference is basic. It is that which distinguishes a painter or sculptor from a craftsman. What then is an intellectual? An intellectual is a man or woman who applies his intellectual faculties to understanding and interpreting the world around him in any or all its aspects. As a result of study, observation or experiment, he formulates conclusions which he believes to be true and communicates his ideas to his fellow-men with a view to influencing their minds, lives and actions.

But within this definition, broadly speaking, intellectuals fall into two classes. The first type is *des cerebraux pur sang*; and the second, those whose intellectual activity is driven by an emotional motive power, principally love, but at times even by its opposite, hatred.

'Great thoughts come from the heart,' said Vauvenargues, and even impersonal scientific thought dealing with the world of matter does not furnish any exception. Pasteur's scientific researches were inspired by compassion.

Max Müller belonged to this type, just as his respected and elder contemporary, Darwin, belonged to the other type. Müller was naturally endowed with an immense zest for life, and also with an overmastering impulse to love. He believed the two to be connected in some way, and at the very end of his life wrote to his son:

> You certainly have grown older and more serious—no wonder, considering what you have had to go through. You'll understand now my old motto, *Das Leben ist ernst* [Life is earnest], though that does not prevent us from enjoying what can be enjoyed. I hope you would grow very fond of somebody or something—that is after all the secret of enjoying life, call it a hobby or some passion, even a passion for statistics or something of the kind, but a passion. Otherwise, life becomes humdrum. Dressing and washing in the morning and undressing at night—one gets so tired of it.

What suffering Max Müller inflicted on himself by falling in love at first sight has already been described. But when at last he got married he could have been expected to live happily ever afterwards. He could not and did not, however, for love bring the idea of death ever near to life, and even when it is not expected it seems to lie in ambush everywhere.

'All men are under a sentence of death, with indefinite reprieves,' said Victor Hugo. As a rule, however, men are able to forget that this sentence is the most certain thing in life. The spectacle of death always carries this anaesthetic with it. There is nothing wrong in this reaction so long as men live and die like animals, which basically they are. But it becomes contemptible when it is aired as a superior moral attitude.

As soon as man became conscious of his existence and capable of evaluating it, he also felt that living was meaningless unless he could reconcile it with death. One of the oldest and most sublime of the Hindu religious utterances is that which says: 'What should I do with anything which does not make me indestructible?' The answer given so far has been an amazing illusion: belief in the continuation of individual life after death.

This consolation has been enough in most circumstances, for basically men live on by virtue of a biological impulse. But when one human being has loved another so much that he or she has ceased to be self-reliant in living, the death of the loved one mortally wounds that biological urge to live. And that wound is most grievous when a child dies, for here two biological forces clash, the one which makes us cling to our own life and the other which makes us love our children. When this happens even the strong and the brave can only limp through life. They are never able to recover their faith in earthly life. Even when they have an unwavering faith in an afterlife, they cannot explain why they should have received this blow.

This terrible calamity of living on, crippled by death, befell Max Müller when he lost his eldest daughter in 1876 when she was only sixteen years old. In her biography Mrs Max Müller wrote: 'He never entirely recovered from this loss: the spring, the joy of life was gone. He suffered severely, and it was months before he could at all rouse himself and take up work again.' But she did not describe what his suffering really was. He set that down in a diary, kept over seven years on 486 folios. To read this volume among the papers left by Max Müller is a harrowing experience.

However, he was familiar with the idea of death from his childhood on account of the early death of his father. After that he also saw many relatives die, and on many occasions recorded his thoughts and feelings about death. More intimately the idea of death came home to him when a year after his marriage his wife lay very near to death for some days after the birth of her first child. On December 20 the child was born, and for two days the doctors were without any hope of saving the mother. Even before this she was very unwell, causing Müller very great anxiety. So on December 10 he wrote to Miss Grenfell: 'If anything should happen to her now, our Christmas will be a very sad time! I try to keep up my spirits, but it is hard work: yet I feel that suffering with her is worth more than all the happiness of the world with others. I pray to God that it may all pass over, but if it must be, we both feel that it is meant as a wholesome trial, and that we must thank God for what He gives and what He takes from us.'

He described his state of mind when his wife was sufficiently recovered, and wrote on February 6, 1861:

> Darling baby...I hardly dare to call her ours as yet, and yet what can we call ours if God did not vouchsafe it to us from day to day? And yet it is so difficult to give oneself up entirely to Him, to trust everything to His Love and Wisdom. I thought I could say 'Thy will be done', but when you were so ill I found I could not—my own will struggled against His will—I prayed as we ought not to pray—and yet He heard me. My darling, it is so difficult not to grow very fond of this life and all its happiness—but the more we love it, the more we suffer, for we know we must leave it and it must all pass away. Does love pass away, too? I cannot believe it.

Some months later he also wrote to Palgrave about his rebellious mood. Palgrave's father had died, and he wrote:

> I know from experience that in the presence of great grief I have nothing to say, and for a loss like yours there is no comfort till we can say by ourselves, 'Thy will be done'. I remember but one time in my whole life when I could not say that... when my wife, whom I had loved for six years without the faintest hope of ever calling her my wife, when she, after one year of a blessed life, was for two days given up as hopeless by the doctors, then I broke down, and I could not say, 'Thy will be done'.

Whenever Max Müller heard of the death of someone who was a friend or relative, and more especially when parents lost a child, he tried, in offering his consolation, to understand or rather come to terms with death. But he could only fall back on faith. So, when he heard of the death of his sister Auguste's little son, who was his godson, he wrote to his mother:

> Sorrow is necessary and good for men; one learns to understand that each joy must be indemnified by suffering, that each new tie which knits our hearts to this life must be loosed again, and the tighter and the closer it was knit, the keener the pain of loosening it. Should we then attach our hearts to nothing, and pass quietly and unsympathetically through this world, as if we had nothing to do with it ? We neither could nor ought to act so. Nature itself knits the first tie between parents and children, and new ties through our whole life. We are not here for reward, for the enjoyment of undisturbed peace, or from mere accident, but for trial, for improvement, perhaps for punishment; for the only union which can ensure the happiness of men, the union between our self and God's self, is broken, or at least obscured, by our birth, and the highest object of our life is to find this bond again, to remain ever conscious of it, and hold fast to it in life and death.

Müller wrote this when he was only twenty-five.

At the age of forty-three when he was the father of four children, three daughters and one son, he wrote in a reconciled vein on the occasion of another bereavement of his sister, the death this time of a daughter. He observed to his wife: 'Krug [his brother-in-law] speaks so freely about those who are no more; I can only listen, for what can one say? Our view of death is wrong, no doubt, because our view of life is wrong.'

He thought his happiness in his family was so great that he could neither wish nor ask for more. Then he remarked: 'I should like to sit quiet, to rest and be thankful, not to move, lest something should move and fall.'

Early in 1868 he lost his only sister Auguste, and after getting a letter from his mother wrote to his wife: "Now that she is gone, all those pleasant recollections . . . which constantly pass through one's mind are altogether changed, all life and reality taken out of them; one's own life brought more clearly before one's mind, as what it really is, a short stay in a foreign land.'

Again he reverts to their own life with the same premonition: 'There is still so much left us, so much to be happy and thankful for; and yet here, too, the thought always rushes across one's brightest hours, it cannot last.' A fear of happiness seems to have been growing on him, for a month later he again wrote to his wife: 'It is true that I have plenty of happiness, but great happiness makes one think so often that it cannot last, and that one will some day have to give up all to which one's heart clings . . . But at the same time we can thankfully enjoy all that God gives, and few have more reason to say this than I.'

Six years later, after visiting the grave of his sister-in-law Charlotte, he wrote to his wife: 'By a grave one learns what life really is, that it is not here but elsewhere; that this is the exile, and there is our home. As we grow older the train of life goes faster and faster, those with whom we travelled together step out from station to station, and our own station, too, will soon be reached.'

These are only a few of the reflections on death which Max Müller set down even before he suffered any bereavement in his own immediate family. He could never forget death. None the less, his natural vitality enabled him to carry on a post-marital love affair with almost childlike gusto, in which he could be as playful as he was passionate. For instance, three years after his marriage, when he was conducting an examination for the Civil Service Commissioners in London, he wrote to his wife:

> I have not much time, my dear wifey, and I am sitting surrounded by sixty candidates, all writing Sanskrit as hard as ever they can—but I can send you a few lines just to shake hands with you or to send you a loving kiss. It is quite miserable to be away from you, and I feel hardly myself when I am away from you. We have grown into one as much as two souls ever can, and I feel when I am with you that there is nothing more to wish for, that life is perfect. May God let us enjoy His happiness for many years.

He also showed his capacity for love by being willing to spend money on her without being compelled to do so by being black-mailed by the turning of her back on him in bed, in the manner of the normal Hindu wife who believes that in married life money or gold, silk, and fine cotton, are the outward signs of an inward grace. A Maltese lace shawl for the 'dear wife' at ten pounds, a satin gown, pins and jewellery are mentioned in Müller's letters. There are also two unusual communications after more than nine years of marriage.

'I have ordered for you,' he writes on January 31, 1869, '24 pint bottles of champagne from London. I thought small bottles would be better for your small meals—they will arrive tomorrow afternoon or Tuesday morning. Is there anything else I can send you, for with all your hard work, I feel sure that you want support?'

He wrote again three days later: 'I am so glad to hear that you are better. Would it not be better to ask Seymour to let you have a dozen of his port and pay him for it? I have no port here, and if I write to London it will take several days before it settled again and is fit to drink. If you cannot get any port, the best thing would be to write to the Civil Service.'

Two days later he tells about a different kind of order: 'I also want to order a carpet for your bedroom. The green carpet turned out very bad, it is tapestry, not Brussels—so I had one of those put down in the nursery, and the other put away. I have had all the boards taken up and relaid...The curtains will look very well, but the old chintz would not do.'

Mrs Max Müller liked the social life of the class from which she came, and at times she appears to have been away from home. These absences, as well as Max Müller's when he travelled abroad, gave him the opportunity to write letters to his wife, which are preserved in five volumes. They give a picture of the sunshine and showers in their married life, the sadness being as tender as the gaiety, with the religious note always coming up to the dominant level, as when he wrote: 'I am yours as you are mine. It is not that you own me or I own you—we were given to each other by Him who made all things—you are mine by Divine right as I am yours. Though many people talk of Divine right and know not what they mean, My own beloved Soul, I know it, and sometimes feel as if I live with you in heaven and in full eternity.'

Müller on his part hated social life as conventionally understood, especially in London. So he wrote to his wife on July 16, 1864: 'I should not like to live in London, no, not for much money—this noise, this skirmish, this dining out and gossiping, this trying to out-do each other in pretence and conceit, is quite sickening.'

Again, learning of the death of Dickens, he wrote: 'Poor Charles Dickens! It is a great loss—but I believe his life was not happy in spite of all his brilliant success. They call him vulgar, but in his abstaining from mixing in what people call good society, I think he showed the true nobility of his soul. I confess I never see so much vulgarity of soul as among that good society with its insolence of wealth and pride of millinery.'

And in 1890 he wrote: 'It is the most horrible invention, what is called Society, and is really no society at all, but simply make-believe, stupidity, and vanity. Life is one thing, society another—but society eats up life.'

He particularly disliked the large dinner parties in London, and preferred a small party of four to six guests. To the end of his life he received many distinguished guests in his own house at Oxford, and from all parts of the world. Even when he was only a young married man the great Tennyson came and stayed one night in his house in High Street. His wife, a young housekeeper, did her best for the honoured guest, but at dinner Tennyson was rather put out to find that the sauce with the salmon was not the one he preferred. He was pleased however with the wing of a chicken, and said that the only advantage he got from being Poet Laureate was that he generally received the liver-wing of a chicken. The next morning at breakfast the young people rather plumed themselves on having been able to get a dish of cutlets, but Tennyson whipped off the cover of the hot dish and seeing them cried out: 'Mutton chops! The staple of every bad inn in England!' But otherwise he was delightful, and asked many questions about Indian poetry. Max Müller knew Ruskin very well, and could not help comparing the two. He wrote: 'It is difficult to define the difference between an Oxford man and a Cambridge man; but if Ruskin was decidedly a representative of Oxford, Tennyson was a true son of the sister university.' That was not on the score of manners, for Ruskin could be very ill-mannered in writing as well as in speaking.

When children came Max Müller's happiness brimmed over. There were three daughters, the first Ada, born in December 1860; the second Mary, born February 1862; and the third Beatrice, born August 1864. Then arrived the only son, on June 9, 1867. Max Müller had professed to be quite satisfied with his three little girls, but he also rejoiced in the birth of what in Germany was called a *Stammhalter*. Giving the news to his cousin, Captain Adolph von Basedow, he wrote: 'I wish to ask you to be one of his godfathers. Both G. and I wish the boy not to be exclusively English, and, like his name, Wilhelm Grenfell, so his godfathers should be of both countries. He can then later on choose his own home, and like the old proverb, *ubi bene, ibi patria.*'

Of course, to all responsible and affectionate parents children are a constant trial, but the really important thing in the parent-child relationship is the question whether under these eddies of anxiety and even irritation there runs a deep current of happiness. In Max Müller's case there could be no doubt about that. After his death a companion of his daughters, who was then Mrs Boas, wrote a description of Müller as a father. 'The memory I have of him will always be chiefly that of the loving father of our dear child-friends, Ada, Mary, and Beatrice. No doubt you will have quite forgotten the way in which he would join, with bright unfeigned sympathy, in our plays and projects on the happy Saturday half-holiday afternoons we spent together; but we—the children—will never forget it.'

But even then Max Müller's distrust of life in this world, his sense of the evanescence of human happiness, would not leave him, as will be seen from the following letter to his wife written on March 13, 1869:

> I long to have my two chicks here again—it seems so incomplete without them. How hard it must be to give up one of one's own children—and yet there was a time when we had not got them and we seemed quite satisfied with life then. So it goes on—more and more ties with every year—happiness that binds us to this life, while we ought really to try to get freer and freer from what binds us here, and more ready to leave it all when the time comes to part.

The blow fell, and he was not ready. In the summer of 1876 the whole family went to Germany, and settled for the time being at Dresden. There the son Wilhelm went to a German Gymnasium, and the girls studied under masters and made good progress in their studies. There he heard of the death of Edith, Dean Liddell's daughter, and wrote to Stanley: 'Poor Liddell, I think of him every day, and I fear that he will never recover from that blow. That daughter of his was a most charming, lovable creature, so natural, so beautiful, and he so fond, so proud of her! "Let us die, in order," says a poet in the *Veda,* "that the old may not weep for the young." It was then, as it is now, inscrutable; and I doubt whether we have learnt to be more patient, and to wait for our time more cheerfully, than the old worshipper of the Vedic gods.'

'Darkness and light divide the course of time,' said an old

English mystic. In the *Veda*, too, the night and day are called sisters. That the young do not weep for the old belongs to the day, and that is natural; but when the old weep for the young that belongs to the everlasting night out of which they never come. In just over six months from the day he wrote about the death of Liddell's daughter, Max Müller was to pass into that night.

His eldest daughter Ada began to feel ill from the end of November, and was seriously ill in the second week of December. It was meningitis. She died at 6 a.m. on the morning of the 16th. Mrs Max Müller had left a day-to-day account of her illness, death and burial in fifteen pages, and this is her account of the last moments:

> I remember when watching her that hour, I prayed that God's Will might be ours. We sent for Dr Oehme, but I saw what was at hand, the breath grew quieter and slower. I threw myself on my knees by her and said aloud—'Lord into Thy hands we commend her spirit.' Then came three deep sighs, and the shoulders moved a little, and all was still. Max poured down some strong wine and we heard it swallowed. I never heard any breath after that, and I turned to Max and cried, 'It is over.' I thought I felt a little fluttering of the heart, and we continued to fan her—but I believe now it was my own pulse, and when Dr Oehme came he said it was all over. It was 6 a.m. that her sweet spirit must have passed away. No struggle or spasm. There could not have been anything more gentle and blessed. Max told the other poor children and his old mother, and it was heartbreaking to hear their cries as I stood over the still form that should never hear cry or know sorrow again.

She was buried on the 19th, a day before her sixteenth birthday, in the graveyard of the beautiful church at Dresden. Max Müller remained there till April 1877 with his mother. Then the family returned to England.

The loss of his daughter completely broke Max Müller, and made him incapable of relying on his own mental resources in order to live. So within a few days of his bereavement he wrote to his friends and relatives in identical language: 'My whole life now belongs to her and her memory, till our long journey is over.' It was not said under the immediate shock of grief. This became his settled mood. A year later he wrote to his wife: 'One can never believe in life again. One does what is one's duty, but the joy of life of which we had so much, is all gone. It is not that one does not feel grateful for what life is—but one always asks—For how long? This has ceased to be our home, though it was such a happy home—one feels now, it is a mere waiting room where one is hustled about.'

This leitmotive recurs in successive letters. Some may be quoted. January 8, 1878: 'I hope I shall have a little rest now—I cannot do without it—it is only when I am alone, and can be together with our darling child that I feel able to endure this life, and can go on with my work.' August 23, 1878: 'It is strange being here alone—I feel as if I had no business to be here at all—I only live for you and with you. My own life seems finished here on earth. I have had that feeling ever since our darling left us—I ought to have gone first, not she.' He wrote this from Whitby, where he had gone to have a change. January 13, 1879: 'I find it so hard to be idle, still harder to smile and look happy, and talk about everything except what is in one's heart. When I saw all the children together, I looked for one face only which was not there. You know what it is. I can bear it all when I am alone.' April 20,1879: 'I sometimes think I can go on no longer—what should I not give for my quiet study! I begin to feel the wear and tear of life much more than formerly—everything is a real effort—one can just do it and that is all.'

Again as late as December 14, 1881, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of his daughter's death:

> My darling Georgie—If you were here, what could one say—it is always the same weight that crushes all thoughts and all words. Ever since our dear Ada was taken from us, this life has become a mere waiting—one goes on as if it were the same as before, but one always feels it is not: part of oneself is no longer here—and what is here, can only be for a short time . . . Let us work on and love on to the last, as our own dear Ada did—happy child—that is what I always say when I think of her.

It must have been a sore trial for Mrs Max Müller, strong-minded woman that she was, to see her husband in this state of mind for the rest of his life. I am not surprised that in her biography she did not give any description of it, and embodied her comment in just one sentence. But without disclosing his state of mind there can be no full understanding of Max Müller's personality.

Another decisive effect on Max Müller of his daughter's death was his persistent distrust of happiness. His third daughter Beatrice was happily married to Thomas Colyer-Fergusson, and had two children. After staying with them in their house, Ightham Mote, in 1893 he wrote to his son: 'They all seem so happy here that one trembles.' A year later he made the same kind of observation to his friend Madame Butenschon: 'My daughter also, and her husband, and her three children, often come to stay with us. I ought to feel happy, *mais la joie fait peur*!'

The fact was that he had lost his faith in life, and when his first grandson was born he could not repress his pessimism, though he only gave it a playful form because a new-born child always brings with it a rejuvenation of life. So he wrote to his new-born grandson:

> I am glad you like your Grandmama; I like her too, and I know she will be very kind to you, and she will not mind your crying. I do not wonder at your crying; it is a hard world you enter, as you will find out by and by. Many people would cry all their lives, if they were not ashamed of it...And now when you have cried yourself out, try to sleep, and forget the beginning troubles of your life. Your grandfather is trying to do the same, but he does not always succeed.

Not finding it satisfying enough to dwell on his lost daughter in thought alone, he began to keep a diary which over the years ran to nearly one thousand pages of close handwriting. In it he set down not only his feelings about her, and expressions of inconsolable grief, but also his thoughts on all his interests, including even politics, as if he could give utterance to them only in her imagined presence. There is something infinitely pathetic to find a man of his intellect and at the age of fifty-seven addressing an analysis of his political opinions and comments to a dead daughter.

> I feel more and more as I grow older, how blessed your little life has been [he wrote on May 2, 1881]. Have you lost more than you have been spared? It is difficult sometimes to have patience with this life. I feel more and more solitary—frightened almost when I see how I stand alone in my opinions and judgements. I try my best to be true—I have no interests that draw me away right or left—and yet I arrive at conclusions far away from those of my friends.
>
> The whole country [he continued by way of illustrating the difference] rings with the praise of Disraeli and abuse of Carlyle. Now, I have watched Disraeli's career—and I have always felt that he has lowered through life the standard of political morality in England. Expediency was his guiding star through life—nor did he make any secret of it—which is a

> kind of tribute which selfishness, as a hypocrite, it is true, but yet as recognizing the existence of higher natures, pays to unselfishness. Never has there been, even by accident, a spark of generosity from that block of brass, never even an appeal to the nobler instincts of those whom he addressed, and excited. Now, other statesmen, however discouraging their experience of men may be, have not lost all faith in true nobility. Gladstone has that redeeming feature in him that he believes in ideals, in duty, in unselfishness, in generosity. I know he has not always been true to himself, but he has tried, and those who look at history as it passes before their eyes have again and again seen him struggling to be true to his better self. To see this keeps a belief in morality alive among the people, but to watch a career like D's, destroys all faith in public virtue. I know nothing against D's private life, and it speaks well for him that he had had so many private friends. But a man may have too many friends. Woe to you, if all the world speaks well of you! G. Smith once wrote of him that he was a valet in the guise of a statesman—hard words, no doubt, but do they not express some truth?
>
> England mourns over Disraeli and has forgotten Carlyle—it is difficult to hold to one's convictions, but one must.

All this seems morbid. I have seen Hindu women nursing their grief, or rather their self-pity, over years with a persistence which I have always regarded as perverse, almost unclean. So I was grieved to see something similar in Max Müller. But an introspective and analytical mind like his could not be unaware of the moral aspect of his grief and fail to put forward a justification for what he was doing. He gave one explanation long before his bereavement. He had gone on a visit to Queen Victoria at Osborne House, where he found the rooms full of recollections of Prince Albert and everyone talking about him as if he were still among them. Mentioning this in a letter to his wife, he also offered his explanation. 'This,' he wrote, 'is thoroughly German, and it always struck me in England how carefully all conversation on those who have gone before us is avoided, and how much of comfort and good influence derived from the memory of those we loved is thereby lost.'

Three years after the death of Ada he wrote to his son, who at that time was only twelve.

> Young as you are [he wrote] you have felt what it is to have one whom we love dearly taken from us.

> We do not mourn for her—she is happy, and she has been spared many of the hard struggles of this life. We mourn for ourselves, because we miss her so much, and we know she would have made our life so bright and happy. But we must learn to be ready to give up everything, however dearly we love it, when God bids us to do so. Sooner or later we know we shall have to leave all those whom we love on earth, till we meet again as God's love and wisdom may order it...Think always what those whom you loved and who loved you on earth, would think of you, and then you will never never go far wrong.

Of course, behind all this lay the Christian view of life and death, and above all its central doctrine of resurrection. In his childhood Max Müller had read and pondered the inscription over the gate-way of the God's Acre at Dessau where his father was buried: 'Death is not death, it is but the ennobling of man's nature.' ❑

Yadgár-e-Ghálib

Altaf Hussain Hali

His Temperament, Behaviour and Ideas

Ghalib was a man of great virtues and great talent. He received everyone who went to see him with a smile. People who saw him once always wanted to see him again. He was never happier than when meeting friends. Their happiness made him happy and their sorrow brought him grief. His friends of all creeds and religions were numerous, not only in Delhi, but all over India. The letters he has written to his friends bear witness to this fact. They are full of love and affection for them. He considered it as a personal obligation to write a reply to every letter. Much of his time, in fact, was consumed by such correspondence. Even during illness and affliction, he was not restrained from answering letters. He never grew tired of his friends' numerous requests. Some of his close friends used to make requests over and above correcting their poetry and he always fulfilled these requests cheerfully. People often sent him unpaid letters by post, but he never complained. On the other hand if someone enclosed postage stamps for an answer, he became very cross. Once he sent a copy of his publications to a prince of Mysore, who asked the price of the book. He wrote in his reply:

> Why have the words of asking the price come to the tongue of the pen? This is not the way of the humble, indigent suppliants. I am without wealth, but not without worth. I am a poet, not a shopkeeper. I wear rags but I am not a bookseller. I am ready to accept a favour, but not to ask a price. Whatever free men send to princes is a gift; and whatever princes bestow upon the free man is blessed bounty. There is no question of buying and selling. No 'how?' and 'why?' enters into it. Whatever I have sent is a gift, and whatever I will send will be a gift.

By nature Ghalib was an immensely considerate and accommodating person. During the last years of his life he always wanted to avoid correcting verses but despite this he never returned anyones qasida or *ghazal* without correction. He wrote to one of his friends,

> "As far as possible I have served my friends. The letters containing verses I used to go through lying down in my bed. Now, neither my eye can see clearly nor my hand can write properly. It is because of senility. Shah Sharaf Bu 'Ali Qalandar was excused by the Prophet for his *sunnah* and by God for his *farz* (mandatory rituals). I expect that my friends, too, would excuse me for correcting their verses. I would write the replies to the courtesy letters somehow or the other."

Despite this declaration people never left him in peace. By chance Mirza Tufta wrote to him saying that he had undertaken the correcting of verses because of his love and taste for poetry. He wrote to him in reply:

> *Lahual Vala quvvat*, (an exclamation of [her] disgust!) what accursed one accepted the correcting of verses for the pleasure and love of poetry. If I am not disgusted with poetry, then may my God be disgusted with me. If I ever wrote to you to this effect it was simply like a dervesh who, if he is angry only takes it out on himself. My dealings with you, are like those of a good wife who sticks to her bad husband through life, for better or for worse.

His Generosity

Though his income was little his generosity was great. Few, if any, were sent away empty-handed from his door. In front of his house, disabled, blind and handicapped destitute men and women were always lying about. After the Mutiny, his income was slightly over one hundred and fifty rupees. His own expenses were not large, but as he helped those in need out of proportion to his income, he, himself was always in financial trouble. Once, after the Mutiny, I witnessed myself, that he received his usual seven-piece robes of honour and the usual pieces of jewellry at the durbar of the Lieutenant Governor. After the durbar the peon and the footmen employed in the offices of the Governor came, as usual, to collect their bakhsheesh.

Ghalib knew that he would have to give bakhsheesh. So, as soon as he returned from the durbar he sent his robes of honour and other articles to the market to be sold. He kept the peons and the footmen waiting in a separate room, and when he received the proceeds of the sale, he gave them money and sent them away happy. He always treated his friends whose fortunes had dwindled with gentleness and loving caution. One day a nobleman of Delhi, a very close friend of Ghalib, who was smitten by misfortune after the Mutiny, came to visit him. He was wearing a quilted robe of very cheap material. Ghalib had never seen him before in such cheap and ordinary clothing, but only in expensive and fancy woollen clothes. When he saw this robe made of cheap material, his heart grieved, but he asked him where he had acquired that material, and that he liked the flowery design of the material very much and that he also wanted a robe to be tailored from the same material for himself, and asked if he could arrange for the purchase of such a material. To all this he replied, "This robe was delivered by the tailor just today, and I have put it on just now, for the first time. If you like it so much I present this very robe to you." Ghalib said, "Well, this is exactly what my heart is longing for, but it is bitterly cold outside how could you manage without a robe until you reach your home?" Then he looked around and taking his new expensive woollen robe off the peg, gave it to him in exchange. And thus with immense subtlety he presented his own robe to him.

He wrote in one letter,

> "The demands of the free, liberal, altruistic and generous life that my Creator has made on me with, could not be manifested to a thousand degree. I do not have the physical strength to take a staff in my hand and hang on it a square piece of cotton matting and a goblet of tin with a cotton string and to strat a journey on foot. At one time I reached Shiraz, at another time I stayed in Egypt or some time arrived at Najaf; neither have I the power and capacity to play host to the whole world. If not in the whole world then at least in the city where I live, a single soul, hungry or naked, cannot be seen. Rejected by God, despised by the world, old, feeble, sick, a fakir, engulfed in poverty—ignoring my other achievements of poetry and other accomplishments—one who cannot stand others' begging around but who is obliged to beg himself from door to door, that am I.

Ghalib had a sharp mind, ingenuity and penetrating intellect. He was also possessed of a prodigious and retentive memory. We have already mentioned that he had no books in his house. He always hired books and returned them after reading. But whatever subtle or useful point he came across in the course of his reading, would be impressed upon his mind. He never used any word, idiom or expression in his Persian poetry which he could not support with examples from the poetry of old masters. In Calcutta some people had raised objections to his poetry and in answer he composed the masnavi *Bad-i-Mukhalif.* Apart from this masnavi, in support of his claim, he quoted about a dozen examples from the poetry of the classical poets and sent them to his adversaries. He has explained it fully in his letters. Whatever he wrote about *Burhan-i-Qate,* he wrote completely from memory. He composed poetry like this. Mostly he composed during the night, in a mood of ecstacy. When he completed some couplet he would tie a knot in the string which fastened his pajama. In this way, before going to sleep, he would tie sometimes, eight to ten knots. Next day he would just untie the knot and would recall the couplet from his memory, and write it down.

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His Understanding of Books

Ghalib frequently studied writings on mysticism, gnosticism and theism, and he understood them well too. Navvab Shefta once said that he was reading a treatise on some most intricate and' subtle problems of mystic gnosticism written by Shah Vali Ullah. There was a discussion in that book, at one point, which it was completely beyond his power to comprehend. By chance Ghalib happened to pass that way. He showed the passage to him and asked him for an explanation. Ghalib went through it, pondered a little while, and then explained it with such lucidity that, according to Shefta, even Shah Vali Ullah would not have improved upon it.

Ghalib's conversation, like his poetic compositions or prose writing, was equally enchanting and enthralling. He was a great wit. This is why people always sought his company and listened to him intently. He did not talk much, but whatever he uttered was not without charm. Humour dominated the fabric of his temperament so much that if we call him an 'animal with jocularity and facetiousness (*hevan-i-zarif*) instead of 'an animal with speech or rationality' (*hevan-i-natiq,*) it would be very appropriate. Pleasant speech, quick wit and pleasantry and adducing one point from another in argument were his specialities.

Once he visited the durbar at the royal Fort after Ramzan. The king asked him, "Mirza; how many fasts did you keep?" He replied, "Sir, I did not keep one." [In the Urdu idiom this could mean 'not even one' or 'just one'.]

Once he went to visit the Navvab Mustafa Khan. In front of his house there was a covered passage which was very dark. When, passing through the dark passage, he reached the front hall, the Navvab was there to receive him. Seeing him Ghalib recited this line "The elixir is found in the darkness" [a reference to the myth of Alexander going with Khizr as his guide in search of the elixir of life and losing his way in the darkest regions where it was to be found]. When they reached the sitting room, facing the east, as it was, he found it full of sunshine; he then recited this line, "This house is all sun". [It could also mean, satirically, that the entire household is curious or queer in some way.]

In one gathering Ghalib was praising Mir Taqi Mir Zauq was also present and he expressed his preference for Sauda. Ghalib said, "I considered you a Miri, but now it seems that you are a Saudai. [*Mir* means prince, head, leader; Miri is one who sides with a Mir or a winner. Sauda means madness; Saudai is a madman or one who sides with a Sauda.]

The room in which Ghalib used to sit all day was located over the doorway of the house. On one side of this room was a very dark and small ante-room with such a small entrance that one had to enter on bended knees. There was a floor-covering inside and during the hot season, Ghalib remained in that small room from ten in the morning till four in the evening. Once during Ramzan, which happened to be in the extremely hot weather, Maulana Azurda came to visit him at midday in the blazing sun. At that time Ghalib was playing chess with some friend in the small room. The Maulana also made his way there and seeing Ghalib playing chess during Ramzan said, "We have read in *hadis* that during Ramzan, Satan is imprisoned in a small room. But now I have doubts about it." Ghalib said, "No Sir, the *hadis* is perfectly valid. But you must remember that the small room in which Satan is imprisoned is that very one."

Though his income was small he never changed his manners or gave up his self-respect. He met nobles and dignitiries of the city on equal terms. He never went to the bazaar except in a conveyance. He also made it a point to visit the houses of the dignitaries of the town who used to visit his house; and never went to the houses of those who did not come to his house. One day he went to see

Navvab Mustafa Khan. I was there too. The Navvab asked him whether he had come straight from his home or if he had been elsewhere. Ghalib, mentioning somebody's name, said, "I owed him one ana. [Ana means 'coming', 'to come' and also an old small Indian coin.] So I went there first.

Once Divan Fazlullah Khan passed Ghalib's house in a conveyance and did not stop to visit him. When Ghalib learnt of this he wrote a note to him saying, "After such a long time you have had occasion to pass my house and I am immensely ashamed of myself that I could not present my compliments to you." When the Divan read this note he was greatly, ashamed of his negligence and at once rode to Ghalib's house to make amends.

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His Liking for Mangoes

He liked mangoes best of all the fruits. During the mango season his friends used to send him mangoes from far and wide. And sometimes he himself asked some of his friends to send mangoes. In the collection of his Persian letters there is one letter which he wrote to the trustee of the Imam Bara of Huglee, during his stay in Calcutta, asking him for mangoes. He wrote

> I am rather a glutton and weak too. I want both the pleasure of the food and comfort of the soul. Wise men know that these two qualities are combined in mangoes, and the people of Calcutta know that Hooglee is the country of mangoes. 0 yes! Mangoes from Hooglee, roses from a rose garden. Benevolence from the Sire and gratitude from me. My Desire considers that before the season is over, at least, two or three times it would touch your gracious mind, and the greed moans that, certainly, this much would not be enough to please it.

One day it so happened that the King, Bahadur Shah was enjoying a walk with some of the courtiers in Hayat Bakhsh garden or Mehtab Bagh garden. It was the mango season and trees were laiden with a variety of the choicest mango. These mangoes were only available to the King, or his progeny or the ladies of the royal household. Ghalib, time and again, looked at the mangoes very intently. The King asked him, "Mirza what is there to look at so intently?" Folding his hands in respect Ghalib replied, "Sire! Someone has said on each grain is impressed this is for so-and-so, the son-of- so-and-so, of the son of so-and-so. I am looking to see if my name and that of my father and grandfather are also written on some of the fruit." The King smiled and in the evening a load of the choicest mangoes were sent to Ghalib.

Hakim Razi Uddin Khan, a close friend of Ghalib did not like mangoes much. One day he was sitting on the verandah of Ghalib's house. Ghalib was also there. A hawker with his asses passed by in the street. Some of the mango skins were lying about the street. The ass caught the smell of them and leaving them, went on. The Hakim remarked, "Look! The mango is a thing that even an ass will not eat." Ghalib promptly replied, "Of course an ass would not eat mangoes."

Ghalib was so fond of mangoes that it seems he could never have enough. His friends and neighbours used to send him them as a gift. He himself would purchase them from the market. Different varieties of mangoes would be sent to him from far and wide. But he was never contented. Navvab Mustafa Khan narrated that in one gathering there were Maulana Fazl-i-Haq, Ghalib and other friends. Everyone was expressing their opinions about mangoes, and the qualities which in their opinion they should have. When everyone had had his say, Maulana Fazl-i-Haq asked Ghalib for his comments. He said, "In my opinion, there are only two necessary requirements concerning mangoes. Firstly, they should be sweet, secondly they should be plentiful." Everyone enjoyed this remark.

His Drinking Habits

For a long time Ghalib used to drink alcohol, before going to sleep at night. The quantity that he had prescribed for himself, he never exceeded. The keys of the box containing the bottles remained with the butler and he had firm instruction that if when drunk, he asked for the key to get wine in excess of his normal dosage, then he should not, in any circumstance, give it to him. It often happened that, in the night, not being himself because of intoxication, he would ask the butler for the key and would scold him too, sometimes severely; but the butler being a faithful man, would never let him have the key. He used to drink very little wine and even that he mixed with half or three-quarters rose-water, as it would minimize its potency. He himself said so;

> "Ghalib's mind is at rest as it is his habit to mix pure wine with rose-water."

But despite the caution and moderation he exercised, this habit destroyed his health, and his Urdu letters are full of such complaints.

Ghalib's close friends and pupils would often go to him in the evenings and would sit with him until it became late. He would amuse them with his talk in the elated state of intoxication. One day Mir Mihdi Majruh was with him. Ghalib was lying on a bare cot groaning. Mir Mihdi started pressing his feet to soothe him. Ghalib said, "Oh, you are a Saiyid why do you make me a sinner." [Ghalib indicating that Mir Mihdi being a descendant of the Holy Prophet should not touch his feet, out of respect.] But Majruh would not hear of it and replied, "Well if you have such considerations then pay me for it." Ghalib said, reluctantly agreed, "Well, that would be alright, then." When he finished pressing and rubbing his feet then he demanded his wages. Ghalib said, "Well brother; you pressed [dabe] my feet I suppressed [dabe] your wages." [Dabna or dabana in Urdu has a wide range of meaning including 'pressing' and 'confiscating'.]

One day I was sitting with him when the evening meal came. There were *shami kababs* (flat round kababs). I pulled out a handkerchief and started waving it to drive away the flies. He said, "You are troubling yourself for nothing. I will not give you any of these *kababs.*" And then he narrated this story. At the table of Navvab Abdul Ahad Khan, different types of dishes were prepared for his relatives, friends and companions who would join him in the meal. But there was always one special dish for him, the Navvab, who would eat nothing else except that. One day *muza'far* (a sweet delicacy) was prepared for him, and that was served to him alone. Among his companions there was a jester who was very free with him, and he happened to be present at the table. The Navvab asked for an empty plate so that he could serve some of the delicacy to him. There was a slight' delay in bringing the empty plate. The Navvab was eating the delicacy and all the time asking for the plate. The jester pulled out a handkerchief and, starting to wave it in front of the Navvab, said, "My lord why ask for an empty plate? In no time at all this one will be empty." The Navvab was greatly amused at this and pushed his own plate of the delicacy towards the jester.

One night, lying on his cot, he was looking towards the sky. Looking at the apparent disharmony and disorder of the stars he said, "A job done without any consultation often ends up in discord. Look at the stars. How they are scattered around? No symmetry, no pattern, no arrangement. But the King is sovereign. No one can even breathe a sigh of disapproval."

One night Saiyid Sardar Mirza came to see him. When after a short while he wanted to go, Ghalib, taking the lantern, came along to the edge of the carpet where all the shoes are taken off, to help him to see his shoes by its light. He said, "Respected Sir, why should you take such trouble? I would find my shoes in any case?" Ghalib said, "I have not brought the lantern to show you your shoes, but to make sure that you do not go off with mine."

Though as a conventional theme, he has lavished much praise on wine in his poetry, as a matter of belief, he considered it immensely bad and he was very ashamed at his habit of drinking. But he never tired covering it up. There are a number of his jokes known about drinking alcohol.

Once a man made a vehement attack on wine and commented that the prayers of a person who drinks are not answered. Ghalib remarked, "Brother; just think. If you've got wine, what else would you wish to pray for?"

He started a letter like this :

> Without wine the pen does not work in my hand. The air is cold. Where is the smokeless fire (a poetic attribute of the wine because of its redness and warmth) Mir Mihdi! It is morning, and very cold. The heater is in front. I pen two words and then warm up my hands. There is warmth in the fire too, but not like that of the liquid fire (wine). You take two draughts and it runs through your whole fabric. Your heart becomes invigorated, your mind enlightened, the power of speech enraptured. Oh a slave of the Saqi of Kausar (an epithet of Hazrat Ali) and with parched lips. What an injustice! What an outrage!

This letter belongs to the period just after the Mutiny when his pension was stopped and he had to give up drinking for the lack of money.

Mir Mihdi Majruh sent a letter from Jaipur and mentioned that at a marriage feast, sherbet in which several hundred *maunds* of candy-sugar of high quality had been used had been prepared. In reply Ghalib wrote, "Mir Ahmad Hussain and Mirza Qurban Beg both read your letter. The mention of seven hundred maunds of candy-sugar in the sherbet made their mouths water. Had it been wine, my heart would have also melted."

The themes of wine that Ghalib has included in his various poetic compositions cannot be less in number than those of Hafiz or Umar

Khayyam. We quote a Persian and Urdu verse and a quatrain of Persian;

> "Do not be mean with the wine today, save for tomorrow. This is casting aspersions on the generosity of the Saqi of Kausar. (Since tomorrow the Saqi of Kausar will provide, you may drink lavishly today without any regard for the future.)
>
> How ashamed I was when (on the day of Judgement) they found no virtuous deed in my record except a perfect fast broken with a cup of wine. (Alcoholic drinks are forbidden altogether in Islam; much less can one imagine a Muslim breaking his fast with this forbidden drink.)
>
> 0 Ghalib! True; no-one is your equal in the art of poetry. But because of intoxication your mind is empty. You want wine and want it free. Well! You are trying to be far too clever! This wine-seller is not the Saqi of Kausar.

Translated from Urdu by K.H. Qadiri

❑

An Artist in Life

Niharranjan Ray

The Sunset Glow
1937-41

On September 10, 1937, Rabindranath suddenly fell seriously ill of a virulent infection, later diagnosed as erysipelas. For forty-eight hours he was in a coma, and for four days he fought with death. 'On the morning of the fifth day when he had re-covered his consciousness and was propped up on pillows in his bed,' writes his biographer, 'almost the first thing he did was to ask for colours and brush and, noticing a rectangular piece of plywood in the room, painted on it a landscape of a dark forest with streaks of faint yellow light struggling to find their way through its thickness, a beautiful painting and obviously symbolic. He also described the experience of a suspended consciousness and its recovery in a poem written almost immediately after the recovery...

> This body of mine—
> the carrier of the burden of a past—
> seemed to me like an exhausted, cloud
> slipping off from the listless arm
> of the morning.
> I felt freed from its clasp
> in the heart of an incorporeal light
> at the farthest shore
> of evanescent things.'[1]

This poem, with others that he wrote during the period, came to be included in the small volume of poems entitled *Prantik*. The poet was now past seventy-six. The burden of age was now upon him, which bent his tall frame and made him some-what weak, physically. His movements from now on were restricted, confined mostly to his abode at Santiniketan or to his Jorasanko house in Calcutta or to the health resorts, in the Himalayas. For the next three years and nine months that he was destined to live he painted as long as he could and when-ever he felt like it; he wrote at least three short stories and two dance-dramas; composed songs and music; and supervised production of his plays by the asrama boys and girls. Many of these creative activities we have already discussed in the previous chapter. However, what he mostly wrote till virtually the end of his life was poetry; these poems were later incorporated and published in at least ten volumes. In these last years, he also wrote essays and addresses on the contemporary human situation in India and the world, on art, on language and literature, on education and science; then he continued to write innumerable letters in which he expressed his views on a variety of subjects: travels, literature, art, contemporary events, men and things, speculative thoughts, flitting visions, ideas and imaginations. He also gave us a short but exquisite autobiography of his boyhood days, vivid in word pictures and nostalgically sweet. The essays on Bengali language {*Banglabhasha Parichay,* Introduction to the Bengali Language, 1937) and education {*Asramer Rup O Vikas,* The Character and Evolution of the Santiniketan Asrama, 1941) show his perennial interest in these subjects. These were presumably written for the immediate purpose of serving the needs of his asrama boys and girls as also of the Bengali boys and girls at school in general. The essays on, art and literature reiterate, in the context of the challenge of the times, his well-known stand on these subjects and were written to underline the basic principles of literature as he understood them. The letters, as usual, reveal his varied interests, his introspective and speculative mind, his deep wisdom and his brilliant sense of wit and humour, all of which he retained up to his last days.

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[1] Kripalani, Krishna *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, Oxford, pp. 383-84.

But the most significant works of these last few years are his paintings, poems, and essays and addresses on the contemporary human situation. It is in the poems especially that we shall see the deep luminosity of a consciousness reflecting the multi-coloured glow of a glorious sunset. Here we shall see the colours of nostalgia woven into the textures of memory, sometimes joyous and fragrant, sometimes sadly sweet owing to the regretful consciousness of experiences missed, owing to angry and painful protestations against injustice and inhumanity of men against men, owing to the shadow of physical suffering and death, owing to the infinite love he bore for the world of men and nature, owing to his deep concern for the common man, the lowliest and the lost, owing to his pangs and anguish of the impending separation from all that he had loved so intensely and passionately. All these are there; but, whatever the experience at a given moment, it is gone through in a spirit of detachment, of hope and faith held aloof though they are bold and strong as ever, and in a spirit of peace and understanding not with the powers that be, but with the Ultimate.

But before I pass on to a consideration of the poems, essays and addresses I would like, for a while, to go back to 1928 (since when Tagore had taken to drawing and painting), and bring the story of this aspect of his life and activities up to date. Indeed, since then, drawing and painting became one of his strongest passions and they absorbed much of his energy, vision and imagination—a passion which retained its freshness and vitality almost to the en of his life. He has left behind about two thousand and five hundre paintings and drawings, all done during the last thirteen years o his life (1928-41), and that too in the short intervals snatched fro his intensive literary activities of this period that produced mor than fifty volumes of poems, short stories, novels, dramas, essay and letters. On top of this, he also found time and energy to undertak public activities. His physical and creative power, even when h was past sixty-five, was amazing.

Though somewhat uncommon, history has, nevertheless quit a few significant examples of poets and men of letters who hav released their creative urges with as much zest and integrity in lin and colour as in words and sounds. Tagore is one of them—perhap the latest and the most well-known. But a muse has to be wooe with patience and constancy, and every art has its own disciplin which one has to go through for a period of probation. The poet painters I have spoken of were no exceptions, and their success an significance have been up to the measure of their discipline, th integrity of their creative urge, and their vision and imaginatio Tagore the painter has provided us with an exception to this fairl general rule.

We have a full record of the poet's own words to testify ho he came into the realm of painting and drawing. From his boy-hoo this art had a fascination for him, and there was a time when, inspire by his elder brother Jyotirindranath who was a talented artist, h with a sketch book in hand, attempted to draw. It was more lik 'toying with picture-making' as he him-self says in *Reminiscence* To his niece Indira he confessed (1893) that very often he used 'cast looks of longing, after the fashion of a disappointed love towards the muse of Fine Art. Still later, he extended his enthusiastic support and patronage to his two nephews, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, and much later to Nandalal in their movement for the revival of the traditional art of the Orient. On many an occasion he watched them draw or paint, but there is hardly any evidence to show that he himself ever wielded a brush.

But we have record of his playing freely with his pen (the earliest one of such plays that I have seen belongs to 1905) in the scratches and erasures strewn over the pages of his manuscripts, and since he has long been a master of rhythm and balance, this play resulted in finding a rhythmic relationship connecting the haphazard, scattered and desultory scratches and corrections into a perfect unity.

> ... The scattered scratches and corrections in my manuscripts cause me annoyance. They represent regrettable mischance, like a gapingly foolish crowd stuck in a wrong place, undecided as to how or where to move on. But if the spirit of a dance is inspired in the heart of that crowd, the unrelated many would find a perfect unity...I try to make my corrections dance, connect them in a rhythmic relationship and transform accumulation into adornment... This has been my unconscious training in drawing... .It interests me deeply to watch how lines find their life and character as their connection with each other develops in varied cadences, and how they begin to speak in gesticulations...And this was my experience with the casualties in my manuscripts, when the vagaries of the ostracised mistakes had their conversion into a rhythmic inter-relationship, giving birth to unique forms and characters. Some assumed the temperate exaggeration of a probable animal that had unaccountably missed its chance of existence, some of a bird that only can soar in our dreams and find its nest in some hospitable lines that we may offer it in our canvas. Some lines showed anger, some placid benevolence, through some lines ran an essential laughter...

These lines often expressed passions that were abstract, evolved characters that hung the one hand and the paintings on the other. The deep blues and reds, the darkness that haunt the paintings, are a direct reflection of this confrontation. These paintings are the records of his struggles with suffering and death before he could set his sail to the 'ocean of peace' which was his final destination.

3

For a better and more comprehensive appreciation of the poems of this period, as also of the essays and addresses on the human situation in India and the world, a rapid survey of the world history of this time, viewed in the context of India, and a look at the personal situation of the poet may not be out of place here.

Bengal witnessed the early flowering of the Indian national consciousness, when Tagore's genius had all but reached its highest point. As he was growing old, the world was going through a series of convulsions caused by the scramble for power among some of the more greedy nation-states. During the period, roughly of the second half of Tagore's life, Bengal and, to a lesser extent, the entire sub-continent of India had an eventful and stirring history—a history of change and suffering, of the eruption of new ideas, new dreams and new passions, a history of gradual but, in the end, radical transformation of India's national consciousness. This whole history is reflected in, and interpreted by, Tagore's life and work. Indeed, the history of India of this half century or so is the history of Tagore's mind and spirit. He is not just an individual person, not even only an institution by himself, he is the embodiment of a whole culture, he is a whole tradition by himself, and in him we find the deepest elements and tendencies of the epoch. At the beginning of this period, we had the rural civilisation of Bengal, fed and nourished from time immemorial by the waters of the vast rivers that flow through this land; whereas by the end of this period all this had given place to the self-assertive and haughty world of today. This was an astonishing transition; and in Tagore we find the whole transition typified in its separate elements as well as in its totality. It has rarely happened in history for one single person to represent and symbolise the whole history and movement of his country for about half century!

In the previous chapter I pointed out that the last ten years of the poet's life, from 1930 onwards, were a grand and beautiful finale, and all his ever-recurring previous seasons of life had led up to it. In order to follow the development of this phase in the poet's life, we must remember the economic and political situation of the time.

In 1930, the poet returned from his latest world tour that included Soviet Russia. The whole world was going through a deep economic crisis which all but shattered India's economic life. In 1931 was published *Rashiar Chithi* (Letters from Russia). The Second Non-co-operation movement collapsed during the same year, and a brutal and bloody regime of terror followed in its wake. By a series of incredibly drastic ordinances, the government of the time sought to suppress every vestige of personal and civil liberty. But, despite imperialist repression and increasing colonial exploitation, new voices, still faint, could here and there be heard, telling about a new ideal of humanity and civilisation. On the political and economic plane, for instance, Jawaharlal Nehru, in his presidential address at the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress in 1936 and '37, gave clarity and coherence to those scattered voices. Soon, however, all voices were strangled by the imperialist repression. Progressive parties and groups were ruthlessly suppressed, and, meanwhile, thanks to their factional fights and differences, they began to grow weak.

Outside India, Italy invaded and conquered the weak and backward state of Ethiopia; Africa had always fired our poet's imagination, and now he wrote a magnificent poem on that continent, stating how it was being exploited by Western nation in their rapacious greed. Japan launched on her career of aggression on China. Germany initiated the cult of race-hatred and let loose a reign of terror. European politics became a matter of adventurism, open greed and wanton robbery, and force ruled unchecked in the world. All the world over culture and civilisation faced a crisis. Man was everywhere in chains, and the altar of humanity, where the poet had worshipped for so many years, was being razed to the ground. Finally, in 1939, the future of civilisation and humanity was consigned to the whirlpool of murder and destruction on a gigantic scale.

Such was the state of the world, and it left a deep impress upon the poet. The marks on his lacerated soul are reflected all over the creative work of this last phase of his life including his paintings. By various ways he drew the attention of humanity to the basic and essential human values: sometimes he invocated those immortals in history who lived and died for such values; sometimes he emphasised the significance of the common man and the deathless spirit in him; then, sometimes, he gave clear expression to his own deep suffering, or pointedly brought out for us to see clearly the stupidity and callousness, the greed and inhumanity that were inherent in the system that prevailed all around.

The prose essays in *Kalantar* (A New Age, 1937), the well-known essay, *Sabhyatar Sankat* (Crisis in Civilisation, 1941), and his open letter in English to Miss Rathbone, among others, reflect this afflicted world. In the anguish of his soul he analyses, with wisdom and passion, the Indian and world situation, and, in doing so, he shows his deep knowledge of, and insight into, history. Sometimes he feels impatient and angry, but his impatience rings with the deep and sincere note of hope and faith in man, his anger glows with the purity of fire that faith in the renewal of life alone can generate. But, bent with age, burdened with the sorrow and suffering of mankind, he stands up erect and aglow as the conscience of humanity as the Great Sentinel of all human values, and he pronounces his verdict on an erring world presented on the dock of God's cour of justice.

But not in the prose essays alone. In many a poem of this last phase, this state of his mind is reflected with the same clarity of vision and imagination, with the same depth of wisdom, in a much more pointed and concentrated manner.

In other poems he lays bare his personal experiences, realisations and convictions, also his failures and shortcomings, as if to prove the validity of the values he wants to uphold, now more than ever before. In 1931 he crossed his seventieth year, and the whole country celebrated his birthday with regal splendour. Six years later he fell seriously ill; he survived it however after a hard struggle, and recovered some of his old strength. The fight with death began again in 1940. It was a heroic struggle but eventually death proved the more powerful. For ten years he had been listening to the footsteps of death coming nearer and nearer. He had been, aware, too, that human civilisation was tottering on the verge of ruin, a civilisation whose values he had once accepted in the belief that they would lead men, to a higher and fuller life. The poet's reactions to these events and situations are scattered in everything that he wrote in the last ten years of his life, but mostly in poetry. Nothing could be more peculiarly individual than these reactions and their expression, yet they reflect, once again, the whole social consciousness of Bengal and of India for one full decade and more.

These reactions are clear, unambiguous. He saw with a poet's all-seeing eye the march of history of three generations, not only in Bengal and India but all the world over. In his last years he saw all that he valued shattered; what had once seemed to be eternally true was now soiled with shame and falsehood. In his own land there was degradation, humiliation, bondage. Yet the poet's soul refused to be paralysed; his faith in man remained as firm and bright as before. Never for a moment did he question his life-long belief that man's ultimate destiny was glorious; never did he become a pessimist or a sceptic. In his last years, detached and serene, full of gratitude for the world's treasures which he had enjoyed so abundantly, he prepared himself to face death. Man's naked soul now stood revealed to his unclouded and perfect vision; his experiences only confirmed his belief in the grand meaning of life, despite failures and frustrations.

Death, then, he knew to be coming, and he consciously prepared himself to face it. But he was not eager to leave this world, to go away from the men and women, he had loved so long and so much, among whom he had known deep and beautiful peace. How could he lose faith in man's glory and destiny when it was man who had given him this beauty and this peace? Man, nourished by the earth, struggling hard and bitterly—the man in the field, in the factory, in the street—this common, elemental man, he realised, was deathless, and the ideal which is rooted in this elemental humanity was also equally deathless. This deathless humanity Tagore loved, and had faith in, for to him was revealed the truth that is hidden in every common man. All this is there in the poems that he wrote and the songs that he composed in the last ten years of his life.

It was as a result of this warm and passionate contact with the common man that the poet came to acquire a new objectivity of outlook. The world and humanity, as felt physical facts or objects, made their first appearance in *Balaka* and *Palataka*, but, in the years between the composition of these two volumes and his last phase, he wavered between his earlier attitudes on the one hand and his inclination towards concreteness and objectivity on the other. During the last ten years, however, his sense of objectivity deepened and took on more definite outlines. He then took up all kinds of themes and subjects, and found a suitably new form and language of poetry characterised by increasing clarity and concreteness, by directness and precision, by compression and freedom. All this issued from his new acceptance of the world of facts and objects, not so much as facts and objects existing by themselves, but by admitting them into the realm of his personality; in other words, by associating them with his self. It is not realism in the usual sense, which is something unknown to, and unrecognised by, the poet. Indeed, Tagore's objectivity meant that a man's self, that is, his personality could grow only by closely relating itself to the world of facts and objects, which was the world of 'not-self.' The earlier phases in the evolution of his personality relegated this world of facts and objects into the background; now it comes to occupy a large segment of the foreground of his consciousness, of his imagination, of his dreams and visions.

And, thus, the poet came to acquire a new sense of human history, indeed of human destiny, and this sense was no abstraction to him any more, but something of his most intimate being. It is, therefore, certainly no accident that he now turned, again and again, to the common man and his every day concerns, away from the bigger men and events in history. He came to believe in the indomitable youth and vitality of this common man, for he knew that without him there would be no civilisation and no progress. The nearer he came to death the more beautiful he found life to be, the lovelier seemed to him the men and women who lived here; all seemed to be more enchanting than ever before. When, therefore, the poet asks in *Parisesh*: Does God forgive those oppressors who are shutting out His beautiful light, poisoning this beautiful world of His creation?—that anguished question is neither irrelevant nor abrupt. It is this perspective, this flawless vision of life that makes up the poet's last phase.

It is surely remarkable that at a time, when any lesser man would have grown reactionary or sceptical, Tagore, far from losing the dynamism and alertness of his mind and sensibility, went on to explore, with all the old catholicity, new possibilities of knowledge and experience. Aware of the imminent dissolution of the tradition, and culture in which he himself was nurtured, aware also of the whole disaster that such a dissolution meant, he was saved from the cheap cult of cynicism by his newly developed sense of the not-self. This enabled him to see at last the transitoriness of every phase of tradition and culture, to see that the onward march of humanity never comes to an end, to see that death and destruction arrive in obedience to natural laws and man himself invites them so that the old and the obsolete accretions may be swept out and new creations forged in their place. It is a vision of mankind marching on eternally, seeking eternally and realising itself. The conflict of beliefs and ideals, the defeat of inadequate faith, the pang of disillusionment—these are only the forms in which the development through struggle takes place. Death and destruction and all the pain that they bring are only the dying agony of the old, the birthpangs of the new. There is no room for pessimism then, no, not even for cynicism, nothing to cause slackness of faith. Tagore was always a passionate worshipper of life; to the shrine of humanity, he always brought the offering of a free and unclouded intelligence, the offering of a pure passion. Wrong beliefs, wrong attachments—do they not spring from the radical sin of ignorance, from the ignorance of humanity? The poet's effort is, therefore, to explore this humanity, to explore its completeness, even through personal suffering and death. It is this vision of man and his world that inspired the poetry of the last ten years of Tagore.

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Jawaharlal Nehru

Sarvepalli Gopal

Europe 1926-1927

On 1 March 1926 Jawaharlal sailed with his wife and child for Europe. The trip was undertaken primarily in the cause of his wife's health. It was hoped that a long stay in Switzerland would help her to shake off the tuberculosis that was still in an incipient stage, while her husband would spend his time in study and travel. But these two years, while they did Kamala little good, were to have a profound effect on Jawaharlal's mental development. Till now he had been one of the ordinary run of confirming nationalists, an unquestioning follower of the Mahatma. The Government of the United Provinces, reporting their decision to give him a passport, summed up his position: 'He is a devoted follower of Gandhi, is much respected and carries great influence with his party.'[1] An over-enthusiastic district magistrate had suggested to Jawaharlal that he should facilitate the issue of a passport by giving an assurance that he was not visiting Europe for political purposes; but neither at Lucknow nor at Simla did Jawaharlal's refusal to give any such assurance cause any hesitation in permitting him to leave. He was not regarded as particularly dangerous, and it seemed worth while to keep his father in good humour. But it was this spell in Europe, and not the earlier years at Harrow and Cambridge, that was to provide Jawaharlal with his real political education; and here again it was Gandhi who was the most perceptive, 'I expect', he wrote to Motilal on the eve of the family's departure, 'great results from this trip, not only for Kamla (*sic*) but also for Jawaharlal.'[2]

In leaving India, Jawaharlal felt somewhat of a deserter.

> I am certainly looking forward to the visit to Europe but I am full of apprehension. It is quite likely that

> when I get there I shall be looking backward to India! It is good to have a change and a holiday but this should rest on the solid foundation something accomplished. The idea of going away just at present with your mother as president of the Congress and Gandhiji toiling away as ever is not particularly gratifying. On the whole perhaps it is as well that I am going but I doubt if I shall be very happy there. India is so like a woman — she attracts and repels.[3]

It was the sense of relief, however, which grew as the months passed. Indian politics at this time were in a low and grim condition. The Congress was riven; with dissension, and even within the Swaraj Party Motilal was fighting a losing battle against opportunism. Communal tension was rising, and many old Congressmen were reacting to events more as Hindus and Muslims than as nationalists. Gandhi had not lost heart, but even he was reconciled to the situation getting much worse before it began to improve. 'I must confess', wrote Jawaharlal to his father later in the year,[4] 'to a feeling of satisfaction at not being in India just at present. Indeed the whole future outlook is so gloomy that, from the political viewpoint, a return to India is far from agreeable.' Settled in Geneva in cheap lodgings, his principal occupations now, besides nursing his wife and escorting his daughter to school and back, were learning French, reading widely and attending various courses and lectures.

> The older I grow the more I feel that there is so much to be learnt and studied and so little time to do it in. Most of us after a very perfunctory education imagine that we have learnt as much as is necessary and do not even attempt to increase our knowledge. This is sad for progress can only come with knowledge and the few years that we spend at school and college teach us precious little.[5]

Bertrand Russell's books, particularly *On Education* and *What I Believe,* made a deep impact.

> I think what is required in India most is a course of study of Bertrand Russell's books, or at any rate some of them. No country or people who are slaves to dogma and the dogmatic mentality can progress, and unhappily our country and people have become extraordinarily dogmatic and little-minded. Generosity of heart is a good thing but what is wanted is not an emotional outburst of generosity but coldly reasoned tolerance.[6]

Like Gandhi he was a long-term, far-seeing optimist about India: 'The outlook in India is dark enough but somehow I do not feel as pessimistic as the news would warrant. Do not get down-hearted. We shall still see *Swaraj*. Whatever India might or might not do, I am fairly sure that England cannot hold on to India for long.[7] The news from India of communal rioting depressed him, but he was convinced that the only remedy was to scotch this so-called religion, secularize the intelligentsia at least and proceed on secular lines in politics. 'How long that will take I cannot say but religion in India will kill that country and its peoples if it is not subdued.' Europe, as Jawaharlal saw it, had got rid of religion by mass education which had followed industrialism, with the result that conflicts were now not religious but economic; and the same process was bound to be repeated in India.[8] This was, of course, too easy and hopeful a solution based on a somewhat simplistic understanding of European developments. But Jawaharlal was still optimist enough to believe that religious differences in India would be automatically dissolved by economic advance, and therefore, gave no serious thought to it.

By the end of the year it was clear that Kamala had benefited little from the treatment of Spahlinger's vaccine injections; so Jawaharlal decided to shift her from Geneva to Dr. Stephani's clinic in the more bracing climate of Montana (Valais). The move to the mountains enabled Jawaharlal to take lessons in skiing and ice-skating; but he was beginning to feel restive, for the wider world and for India. He could not as yet return to India; his wife was still far from well and Motilal was planning a trip to the West. So the family started their wanderings round Europe. There were visits to the museums of London, Paris, Berlin and Heidelberg, tours of factories and interviews with Indian exiles and revolutionaries. Jawaharlal was at Paris airport, with his daughter perched on his shoulder,[9] waiting for Lindbergh to complete his lone journey across the Atlantic — an achievement which greatly impressed him for its human daring and resolution. Always keen on flying, and having himself done two short hops at this time from London, once to Paris and once to Ostend, Jawaharlal urged his countrymen to become more air-minded.[10]

However, the real significance of these travels was that Jawaharlal now came into contact with European political workers and movements, and these gave a new depth to his thinking and activities. The discursive reading undertaken in Switzerland had ploughed up his mind; it was ready for new seeds but had not yet received them. A letter published in the *Journal de Geneve* was staunchly nationalist in tone and expounded the standard arguments about the traditiona unity of India and the impoverishments and divisions brought abou by british rule;[11] but there was no glimmer of any fresh effort a interpretation. In an article published in India, he advocated complet independence in the sense of full freedom in both external an internal affairs and favoured the formation of an extremist pressure group within the Congress to counter the activities of those wh tried to hold the organization back.[12] This received wide publicit and, as Motilal complained, was generally interpreted as a criticism of the Swaraj Party and of its leadership: 'it is the most famou document in India at the present moment and is being used fo a variety of purposes not even dreamt of by you.'[13] Jawaharlal wa irritated equally by the Liberals, the Swarajists, and the no changers, all of whom seemed to have more or less the same moderat mentality.

> The mention of Independence frightens them and every effort is made to dissociate oneself from the idea or from its implications. The Indian States and foreign policy are taboo and not to be discussed; the army and problems of defence are beyond us, and so we spend all our energy in protesting, with varying degrees of emphasis, against internments and imprisonments and regulations etc. I am afraid this very tame and constitutional and legal and proper and reasonable activity raises no enthusiasm in me.[14]

But while there was commitment and impatience, there wa no fresh line of analysis.

The turning-point in Jawaharlal's mental development was th invitation to help in organizing — and to participate as the representative of the Indian National Congress in — the Internationa Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism to be hel at Brussels in February 1927. The chief organizer of the conferenc was Willi Muenzenberg, who 'really invented the fellow-traveller'. The Soviet Union kept severely aloof and no one from that countr attended the conference, though, as Jawaharlal realized even at th time,[16] the objectives of the conference were wholly in accordanc with Soviet foreign policy and were intended to bring together th forces of anticolonialism and organized labour as against imperialism especially British imperialism. This did not frighten Jawaharlal an he suggested that a large delegation, including an economist an an expert on military matters, be sent from India by the Congress, but in fact he was the only delegate.

Clearly, at such a conference where the prime target was Britis imperialism, the official representative of the Indian Congress would be an important figure; and Jawaharlal was appointed one of the members of the Presidium. He arrived at Brussels on 6 February, took part in all the informal meeting, presided over one of the formal sessions and played a leading role in the drafting of many of the resolutions. 'I am dead tired', he wrote from Brussels on the 16th,[18] 'after 8 or 9 days of the Congress here. I have not had a good night's sleep and hardly a decent meal since I came here.' It was a strange medley of delegates — European Communists, trade unionists and pacifists, nationalists from Asia, Africa and Latin America, and secret service agents — with 'many delegates doubling the roles. However, Jawaharlal could not but be influenced by some of the men and women he met here — Henri Barbusse, George Lansbury, Ellen Wilkinson, Fenner Brockway, Harry Pollitt, Reginald Bridgman, Edo Fimmen, Willi Muenzenburg, Ernst Toller, Mohammed Hatta and Roger Baldwin, apart from a large number of delegates from China, Africa, Mexico and Latin America — and his fallow mind was receptive to Marxist and radical ideas.

In his first statement to the press, Jawaharlal merely emphasized the common element in the struggles against imperialism in various parts of the world; the fabric of imperialism looked imposing and appeared to hold together, but any rent in it would automatically lead to its total destruction. Indian nationalism was based on the most intense internationalism, just as the problem of Indian freedom was a world problem; as in the past, so in the future, other countries and people would be vitally affected by the condition of India. But his speech at the inaugural session of the conference was at a deeper level. Jawaharlal pointed out that India was the prime example of imperialism. She had been continuously exploited and terrorized by the British, and her workers and peasants had been systematically crushed. 'It does not require statistics, facts or figures to convince you that India in the course of the last few generations had terribly deteriorated, and is in such a bad way that if something drastic is not done to stop this process India may even cease to exist as a nation.' It was the policy of the British to create differences among Indians or, where they already existed, to increase them, to maintain the feudal princes in power, to support the rich landowners and to promote an unholy alliance of British and Indian capitalists. 'Naturally, therefore,' concluded Jawaharlal, introducing into his articulated thought a consciousness of the interlinking of economics and politics, 'from their capitalist and imperialist point of view they wanted to do everything in their power to hold on to India.' For the first time, instead of, merely condemning British imperialism, Jawaharlal had tried to understand the motives, manner and methods of its functioning. His mind had taken a big step forward.

The resolution on India, drafted by Jawaharlal, accorded the warm support of the conference to the liberation of India from foreign domination and all kinds of exploitation as an essential step in the full emancipation of the peoples of the world. The peoples and workers of other countries should fully cooperate in this task and in particular take effective steps to prevent the dispatch of foreign troops to India and the retention of an army of occupation in India. This was really meant by Jawaharlal for his audience in India, to weaken 'the extraordinary mentality which clings on to the British connection in spite of everything' and took the presence of British troops for granted. Similarly, to goad the Indian National Congress into looking beyond political freedom, Jawaharlal, in the last paragraph of the resolution, expressed the hope of the conference that the Indian national movement would base its programme on the full emancipation of the peasants and workers of India, 'without which there can be no real freedom', and would co-operate with movements for emancipation in other parts of the world.

Apart from India, the chief planks of the conference were China and Mexico. At this time in China the Kuomintang, in short-lived alliance with the Communists, was riding on a wave of nationalism and seeking to unite the country; and the Chinese delegation to the Brussels conference, to a large extent official, was hoping to enlist the sympathy, if not support, of public opinion and labour organizations in other countries. A joint declaration of the Indian and Chinese delegations, clearly drafted by Jawaharlal, bears the marks of an outlook which was to remain unchanged for over thirty years. Friendship with China was the core of his pan-Asian feeling. The declaration, in line with the prevalent attitude of cultural nationalism in India and its stress on the ancient civilizations of the East, recalled the close cultural ties between the peoples of India and China for over three thousand years and blamed the British for fostering ill-will against India in China by utilizing Indian mercenary troops 'in support of British capitalist brigandage.' It was therefore urgent and essential that the Indian people should be educated regarding China, and British imperialism should be simultaneously engaged on two of its most vital fronts. 'We must now resume the ancient personal, cultural and political relations between the two people. British imperialism which in the past has kept us apart and done us so much injury, is now the very force that is uniting us in a common endeavour to overthrow it.' The Indian and Chinese delegations thereafter persuaded the British delegation, representative of the

British Communist Party, the Independent Labour Party and certain sections of the Labour Party, to commit themselves to support the oppressed countries in their fight for 'full independence' (a phrase preferred by the British to 'severance of the British connexion'), to oppose all forms of coercion against colonial people, to vote against all credits for the maintenance of armed forces to be used against oppressed nations and to carry on propaganda among British troops. In particular, the British delegation promised to advocate direct action, including strikes and embargoes, to prevent the movement of munitions and troops to China, and demanded unconditional recognition of the nationalist Government, abolition of unequal treaties and of extraterritorial rights and surrender of foreign concessions.

The Chinese delegation was keen on promoting contacts between the Kuomintang and the Indian Congress and on educating Indian opinion on the Chinese question. Jawaharlal realized that the British Government could prevent exchange of visits at any level, but he felt that the effort should be made. 'It is up to us in India to do something practical for China. Vague resolutions of sympathy do not carry one far.' What he had in mind was the dispatch of an ambulance unit of twenty to twenty-five volunteers.[19] This was intended not only to encourage cordial relations between India and China; Jawaharlal was also anxious to widen the vision of Indian nationalism. He saw too the importance to the world of the future of China, especially as at this time the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party were acting in alliance. What was happening in China, therefore, was not merely an assault on foreign imperialism but a direct attack on the capitalist system.

> A victory for the Chinese means the creation of a great Soviet Republic in the East closely allied with Russia and together with it gradually dominating the whole of Asia and Europe. This does not mean that the Chinese Republic will be fashioned wholly on the lines laid down by Marx. Even Soviet Russia, owing to the pressure of the peasantry, has had to give up part of its communism, and in China where the small peasant is the deciding factor, the departure from pure communism will be all the greater.[20]

This prescience, the realization that if the alliance of Chinese parties held it would be the Communists and not the much larger Kuomintang who would determine the lines of the future, and the recognition that there would be a large indigenous element in Chinese communism, can only be regarded as astounding — especially as at this time Stalin's agents were dominating the Chinese Communist Party. But this was not all. Jawaharlal proceeded to point out that Britain, even with the aid of other European countries, would be unable to do much injury to the great continental bloc of Russia and China. 'What is more likely is that England in order to save herself from extinction will become a satellite of the United States and incite the imperialism and capitalism of America to fight by her side.' It was at Brussels that Jawaharlal for the first time, perhaps because of his meeting with the delegates from Mexico and other countries of America, discerned that Britain was fast losing its leadership to the United States.

> Most of us, specially from Asia, were wholly ignorant of the problems of South America, and of how the rising imperialism of the United States, with its tremendous resources and its immunity from outside attack, is gradually taking a stranglehold of central and south America. But we are not at liberty to remain ignorant much longer, for the great problem of the near future will be American imperialism, even more than British imperialism. Or it may be, and all indications point to it, that the two will join together to create a powerful Anglo-Saxon bloc to dominate the world.

Jawaharlal expected, in face of the Chinese threat to imperialism, a world war in five years if not earlier. In any such war the North-West Frontier area of India would naturally be a principal battle-ground, and it was thought that the British were planning with this in view. Again, under the guise of encouraging Indian industries, the British were seeking to make India a self-sufficient country in munitions and other sinews of war. Jawaharlal wished the Indian Congress to take cognizance of these developments and formulate its own policy and programme on that basis. There should be a strong agitation against British intervention in China and the utilization of Indian troops for this purpose.

Jawaharlal's forecasts did not come immediately true, if only because the Kuomintang fell out with its Communist partner. But more than twenty years after this report was written, with the triumph of the Communists in China, the conclusion of a Sino-Soviet alliance, the formulation of a Chinese pattern of Communism and the evolution of Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States, Jawaharlal was to be proved one of the most far-seeing prophets in world affairs in our age.

The Brussels conference concluded with the issue of a manifesto based on the Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism. It was asserted that European capitalism had battened on the exploitation of countries in Asia, Africa and America. In its latest phase of finance capitalism a few countries, and in them a few individuals, controlled the world. But the world war and its consequences had clearly shown that imperialist capitalism was its own grave-digger. A huge wave of the movement for national emancipation was passing over the world, and had received a mighty push forward from the Russian revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union. But the imperialists would not easily give up their booty, as was proved by the activities of 'the worst adventurer of our time', Winston Churchill. So the Brussels Conference decided to found the League against Imperialism and for National Independence, to organize co-operation between nationalist movements in the colonial countries and labour and anti-imperialist movements in the exploiting countries.

Jawaharlal does not seem to have taken an active part in drafting this manifesto, originally written in French, and resented the way in which it was rushed through the conference. But by this time he had no very great objection to its sentiments. He had come round to the Marxist viewpoint in its broad essentials. He agreed that imperialism and capitalism went hand in hand and neither would disappear until both were put down. As against this, the forces opposing imperialism and capitalism should be co-ordinated so as to strengthen each other. In colonial countries, nationalism automatically and rightly took precedence over all other ideologies, but such nationalism should have a broad basis, derive its strength from the masses and work specially for them.

Jawaharlal was appointed an honorary president of the League as well as a member of the Executive Committee, though he declined appointment as one of the secretaries on the grounds that he would be away in India. But during his stay in Europe for the rest of the year he attended regularly the meetings of the Executive Committee. Though the Communists were only a minority in this body, they sought to dominate it, and Jawaharlal was one of the leaders of an effective resistance. Often irritated, but never angry,[21] he made it clear that while he accepted in its fundamentals the socialist theory of the state, he had 'the strongest objection to being led by the nose by the Russians or by anybody else'.[22] But he did not think there was much danger of this, and, so long as the Soviet Union tried to utilize the League on unobjectionable lines, he saw no harm in co-operating with her against British imperialism. So he recommended to the Working Committee that the Congress might become an associate member of the League. It was possible that the League might develop, in contrast to the ineffective League of Nations, into a powerful League of Peoples; but this was not the reason why Jawaharlal advocated association of the Congress. He was enough of a realist not to place faith in such fantasies. Nor did he trust much to the support of British and other foreign working-class movements; 'almost every Englishman, however advanced he may be politically, is a bit of an imperialist in matters relating to India.'[23] He would have agreed broadly with Gandhi that India had little to expect from such bodies as this League, because most of the European states were partners in the exploitation of India, and their sympathy could not be expected in the final heat of the struggle.[24] He wrote to Gandhi:[25]

> I do not expect much from it and indeed I am quite sure that none of the members of the so-called imperialist or oppressing nations will help us in the least whenever their interests conflict with ours. I have no illusions about their altruism. But I welcome all legitimate methods of getting into touch with other countries and peoples so that we maybe able to understand their viewpoint and world politics generally. I do not think it is desirable, nor indeed is it possible for India to plough a lonely furrow now or in the future. It is solely with a view to self-education and self-improvement that I desire external contacts. I am afraid we are terribly narrow in our outlook and the sooner we get out of this narrowness the better. Our salvation can *of* course come only from the internal strength that we may evolve but one of the methods of evolving such strength should be study of other people and their ideas.

Association would also enable the Congress to utilize the League as its vehicle for propaganda abroad without committing it to the adoption *of* a socialist programme or limiting its freedom *of* action in India or elsewhere. Moreover, the League could be used by the Asian members to keep in close touch. At Brussels many delegates from Asia, despite discouragement from the organizers, had met informally and talked in terms of forming an 'Asiatic federation.' But this was thought to be premature and it was decided, for the time being, to concentrate efforts on strengthening the League and promoting bilateral relations.

However, it was the Soviet Union that now dominated Jawaharlal's mind, just as it had, an unseen presence, dominated the Brussels conference. He read all that he could lay hands on, books both by partisans and by critics, about developments and conditions in that country, and found much to admire. He believed that whatever the tradition of hostility between Britain and Russia, to a free India she would be no threat; and even if India were wholly opposed to Communism she could have friendly relations with Russia. Jawaharlal, far-seeing as ever, recognized that as she grew in power Soviet Russia might develop a new type of imperialism; but he thought there was little chance of this for a long time to come, and for the moment, for reasons of self-interest, Russia was befriending all oppressed nationalities.[26] It seemed logical, therefore, that he should visit the Soviet Union before returning to India; and the opportunity came, after Motilal's arrival in Europe in the autumn, when father and son were invited to the decennial celebrations *of* the 1917 revolution. When they were at Berlin the Soviet ambassador conveyed the invitation to them; and though this was short notice they decided, after some hesitation, to accept it.[27]

The invitation came in the last phase *of* the Soviet policy of support for national liberation movements in Asia, regardless of their ideology. This was a heritage from Lenin, who had believed that colonial countries like India should have their bourgeois, democratic revolution before they could think off proletarian rule, and that therefore it was the duty of Communists to work at this stage in co-operation with the leadership of the bourgeoisie. So to Lenin Gandhi was a revolutionary, and he rejected the argument of M.N. Roy that the Indian bourgeoisie was no different from the traditional feudal classes. The thesis of Lenin became the official policy of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, and although by the end of 1922 there were the beginnings of Communist party organization in India, the general plan was for the Communists to infiltrate the Congress rather than promote a revolutionary mass party of their own. It was true that in May 1925 Stalin had accepted the position of Roy and advocated the formation of a revolutionary bloc in India led by the proletariat in general and the Communists in particular, and including the revolutionary section of the bourgeoisie.[28] But the other line of working with bourgeois leadership still held the field till the end of 1927. The Brussels Congress testified to the importance the Soviet Union still attached to bourgeois nationalist movements; and the severance of diplomatic relations by Britain in 1927 followed by strong rumours of British preparations for military invasion, with Peshawar as a base,[29] led to a war scare in the Soviet Union. Now more than ever it seemed invaluable to have the sympathy, if not the active support, of the Congress Party.

A change in Soviet attitude came towards the end of 1927. The setbacks in China and the failure of the efforts to reach a *rapprochement* with the Western Powers unnerved the makers of Soviet and Comintern policy; and Stalin, who was now finally emerging as the victor in his rivalry with Trotsky, viewed the colonial question only against the background of European events and had a more limited idea of the security of the Soviet Union. At the Fifteenth Party Congress, Bukharin made it clear that the bourgeoisie in India could no longer be supported. The Sixth Congress of the Third International formally abandoned in 1928 the policy of a united front against imperialism and directed the Indian Communist Party to act in isolation and work for an armed insurrection, for the bourgeois nationalist parties had become supporters of imperialism and, having assumed 'a reformist and class-collaborationist character', could not be expected to lead the revolution.

So November 1927 was the last occasion, for many years at any rate, when the Nehrus could expect an official invitation to Moscow. They were in Russia for only a few days, but the articles which Jawaharlal wrote for *The Hindu* covering this visit and which were later published as a book,[30] show the deep impression made on him by 'this strange Eurasian country of the hammer and sickle, where workers and peasants sit on the thrones of the mighty and upset the best-laid schemes of mice and men'.[31] They were, he wrote to his sister from Moscow,[32] 'in topsy turvy land. All one's old values get upset and life wears a strange aspect here.' He knew that they were on a conducted tour, seeing only what they were allowed to see; he knew too that conditions in the sprawling provinces hardly came up to what was to be found in Moscow and its environs. Yet he was convinced that the Soviet Union had made rapid progress in agriculture, prison reform, the eradication of illiteracy, the treatment of women, the handling of the problem of minorities and the removal of the sharp contrasts between luxury and poverty and of the hierarchy of class.' He was sure too that the Soviet Union had much to teach India, which also was a large agricultural country with a poor and illiterate population. His mood was defined by the lines which he put on the title-page of his book:

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very heaven.

Starry-eyed? Perhaps; but it is well to remember that the Russia which Jawaharlal visited was still very much the Russia of Lenin, even though Lenin had been dead for over three years. Stalin had not yet become the undisputed dictator, and there was a considerable amount of mass support for the Soviet regime. The New Economic

Policy was still in effect. 'Get rich', Bukharin had advised the peasants in 1925; and the peasants still dominated the countrywide and brought about a strong recovery in food production. This was to them the 'golden era of Soviet rule'. The number of family holdings rose to 25 millions in 1927, and comprised 98.3 per cent of the sown area.[33] Stalin, like Lenin, was still speaking in terms of voluntary collectivization of agriculture.It was only after 1927 that it was felt that 'Bolshevism in alliance with the peasants', apart from being ideologically untenable, was also impracticable. The food shortages in large cities in the summer of 1927, despite a good harvest, showed that, without mass production of consumer goods, the peasants could not be induced to sell their grain. The percentage of the crops being sent to the urban markets was even less than that in the years before the war. On the other hand, industrial production, which till 1927 had shown a rapid rise because of the reactivation of productive capacity of the years before 1917, now began to slacken. If industrialization — and specially, heavy industrialization, thought to be so necessary with the imminent prospect of war — were to be maintained, it was necessary to insist on the peasants disgorging their supplies; and this meant rapid and enforced collectivization. In December 1927, therefore — a month after the visit of the Nehrus — the Party Congress decided on an offensive against the *kulak*, opening a new chapter in Soviet history.

So Jawaharlal saw the Soviet Union in the last days of its first, halcyon period. If his reaction was idealistic, it was partly because there was still some idealism in the air. The grounding in Marxism, which he had received at the Brussels conference and after, was followed by a near-conversion to communalism by practical testimony. Jawaharlal had been particularly impressed by Lenin's leadership, by his realism and resilience, and above all by his insistence on professional, full-time revolutionaries. The need for such workers in India was obviously even greater, and it was as one such that Jawaharlal now doubtless saw himself. He who had sailed from India as a dedicated disciple of Gandhi returned a self-conscious revolutionary radical. Although always to be deeply influenced by Gandhi, he was never again to be wholly a prisoner in the Gandhian mould. But it is significant that the change was wrought not by the revolutionary situation in India but by what he saw and heard and read in Europe. Jawaharlal was always a radical in the European tradition, seeking to apply and adapt its doctrine to his own country. This could be both a strength and a weakness.

Notes

1. Letter of Chief Secretary to Government, United Provinces, to Home Secretary, Government of India, 6 February 1926. Home Dept. Pol. File 23 of 1926.
2. 17 February 1926, *Collected Works*, vol.30 (Delhi, 1968), p.20.
3. To Padmaja Naidu, 29 January 1926, S.W., vol. 2, p. 226. In December 1925, Sarojini Naidu had taken over as President of the Congress.
4. 6 October 1926, S.W., vol. 2, p. 244.
5. To Syed Mahmud, 22 March 1927, S.W., vol. 2, p. 314.
6. Idem, 12 September 1926, S.W., vol. 2, p. 242.
7. Idem, 11 August 1926, S.W., vol. 2, p. 241.
8. Idem, 24 May, 15 July and 11 August 1926 and 14 July 1927, S.W., vol. 2, pp. 232-6, 240-41 and 328—9.
9. Mrs. Gandhi's broadcast reported in the *Hindustan Times*, 24 July 1969.
10. Letter to his father, 16 November 1926, and 'Victory over the Air', article in *Aaj*, 28 September 1927, S.W., vol. 2, pp. 250-51 and 364-7, respectively.
11. 3 August 1926, S.W., vol. 2, pp. 236-240.
12. Article in *Pratap*, December 1926.
13. 13 January 1927.
14. To A. Rangaswamy Iyengar, general secretary of the Congress, 25 January 1927, S.W., vol. 2, pp.258-9.
15. Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Pelican edition, 1968), footnote on pp. 285-6.
16. See his confidential report to the Working Committee, 19 February 1927, S.W., vol. 2, pp. 278-97.
17. To his father, 16 November 1926, S. W., vol.2, pp. 250-51.
18. To A. Rangaswamy Iyengar, 16 February 1927, S.W., vol. 2, p. 277.
19. Letter to N.S.Hardikar, 8 March 1927,S.W., vol. 2, p. 304. See also his article in *The Volunteer*, April 1927, on 'The Situation in China and India's Duty', ibid., pp. 326-8.
20. Confidential report to the Working Committee, 19 February 1927, S.W., vol. 2, p. 281.
21. Roger Baldwin's recollections recorded in 1967, N.M.M.L.
22. Confidential report to the Working Committee, S.W., vol. 2, p. 289.
23. Note for the Working Committee on a proposal to prepare a Parliamentary bill for India, 10 March 1927, S.W., vol. 2. pp. 306-7.
24. See. for example, Gandhi to Motilal, 14 May 1927, *Collected Works*, vol. 33 (New Delhi, 1969), p. 321.
25. 22 April 1927, S.W., vol. 2, p. 326.
26. A Note on Foreign Policy for India, 13 September 1927, S.W., vol. 2, pp. 348-64.
27. Nehru to Amal Home, 20 October 1959, Nehru papers.
28. D.N. Druhe, *Soviet Russia and Indian Communism* (New York, 1959), p. 93.
29. *New York Times*, 30 June 1927.
30. *Soviet Russia, Some Random Sketches and Impressions* (Allahabad, 1928).
31. Ibid.
32. 10 November 1927, S.W., vol. 2, p. 369.
33. A, Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.* (London, 1969), p.106.

Rajaji: A Life

Rajmohan Gandhi

'Fall'
1935-37

The first quarter of 1935 saw an edgy C.R.. He had his reasons. He had been questioned on his Ashram's financial health by Kishorelal Mashruwala, president of the Gandhi Sewa Sangh, to which C.R.'s Ashram was affiliated. Mashruwala implied that the Ashram was likely to face a Rs. 28,000 loss, and C.R. was asked about a loan the Sangh had given to the Ashram.

Claiming that the Rs. 28,000 figure was an 'unfounded estimate,' C.R. wrote to Mashruwala;

> If it is not possible to let the Ashram function autonomously and if it becomes necessary to withdraw the loan given for khadi work, I am quite prepared to let the institution be wound up... [Or,] you could run the Ashram directly....The time has come when I should be relieved of the charge.[1]

This correspondence was followed by a letter from Gandhi. Because of his involvement with three by-elections to the Madras legislature, all won by Congress candidates, C.R. had missed a Wardha meeting of the Seva Sangh trustees, of whom he was one. The Mahatma wrote to him:

> You must attend these meetings regularly or not be in these bodies at all. I feel sore about it (2.3.35)[2]

The letter burst a dam. C.R. sent in his resignation as a trustee—and asked for Gandhi's leave to quit the AICC, the Working Committee, the All-India Parliamentary Board, the presidentship of the

TNCC, and the charge of the Ashram, the lot! He was weary and longed for rest, he explained.

'Not so fast, nor so cheap,' replied the Mahatma (9.3.35), adding, 'There can be no weariness, no rest for you or me. Our rest has to come in the life here after, if at all.' When C.R. repeated his yearing, Gandhi wrote back (24.3.35):

> You may give up posts of responsibility, but you dare not give up responsibility so long as there is breath in you.

Obviously C.R. had been feeling aggrieved. Making a guess, K.M.Munshi asked Gandhi whether not being made Congress President could have upset C.R. After directly questioning C.R., Gandhi wrote to Munshi that there was 'no such reason as you suspect'(2.5.35). However, it is possible that disappointment on the score was felt by C.R. — and then quickly slapped down.

Besides, C.R.'s heart was increasingly in the legislature. We have no evidence that in early 1935 he harboured a wish to play a role there himself, but his zeal was unmistakable in the elections of 1934 and the by-elections of 1935, and we will shortly see what happened in 1937.

In any case, he was genuinely tired. To Prasad he wrote of a 'weariness of flesh and spirit' and a desire to be relieved 'for a good long time if not once and for all,' and to Patel of 'a chronic mood of disappointment,'; it was 'an irresistible mental craving for a holiday.' He said in a letter to Agatha Harrison, a friend of India in England.[5]

His colleagues protested. 'Do not imagine,' Prasad wrote to C.R. 'that it is a matter of form with us when we insist on your continuing.' Patel used stronger language:

> You have done us a great injustice. We all have frail bodies, but none of us has the right to leave others in the lurch. What right have we.... To seek solitude.... after having made several young men in the country to sacrifice their all? I do not understand you, but I know you are very obstinate. (15.3.35)[6]

To talk with Gandhi, Patel and Prasad, C.R. went to Wardha. After eliciting a promise that C.R.'s help "would be available whenever needed."[7] Gandhi and the others yielded to C.R's request.

He was permitted to shed, for a period, all his positions, but Patel extracted C.R.'s consent to being retained on the Parliamentary Board — after assuring him exemption from meetings until he felt restored. The Mahatma and Patel had desired that C.R. should follow Dr. Ansari, who had resigned for health reasons, as the Board's chairman; the burden now went to Vallabhbhai.

Describing C.R. as 'the leader of the Cognress fight for freedom,' the TNCC accepted on 11 May1935, C.R.'s resignation as its president. An editorial in *The Hindu*(13.5.35) regretted the withdrawal of one who 'in the public estimation stands second only to Gandhiji among the nation's leaders.'

Feeling 'as free as a bird,' (*The Hindu*, 13.5.35) C.R. sought his strength back, resting with his son Krishnaswami in Madras, or in his Ashram, where he tried his hand at bee-keeping. Part of 'vacation' was devoted to writing a commentary on the Gita.

In three months, however, he was obliged to spend some weeks in Delhi, where Lakshmi had just given birth and Devadas was laid low with typhoid. Accompanied by Lakshmi and her two children, C.R. stopped in Wardha on his way back.

By this time Patel had thought up a plan; C.R. should succeed Prasad as Congress President. At Wardha, the Mahatma put the plan to C.R., who turned it down as impossible. To Patel, Gandhi wrote (13.9.35) that C.R. was 'in no condition just now to accept the crown,' being still 'extremely tired.'[8]

With C.R.'s consent the Mahatma made the offer of the Presidentship to Jawaharlal, who was in Europe, where his wife Kamala lay ill. 'Jawaharlal is willing,' Gandhi wrote to C.R. at the end of September.[9]

By the second week of October C.R. was willing to involve himself politically again. He wrote to Gandhi (8.10.35):

> I was and I am still doubtful about Jawaharlal's fitting in with the parliamentary programme and policy. While I readily agreed and had in fact anticipated you in my own mind, that...we could not pitch on a better choice for the Congress president's place this year...I could not but feel very doubtful about his dealing with the parliamentary policy in the right way.[10]

Congress, C.R. added, should be ready to take office and prevent 'reactionaries and anti-nationalists' from continuing in power.

Visiting Madras for an AICC meeting in October that C.R. did not attend, Prasad, calling himself 'an usurper of the place which is rightly [C.R.'s], said that C.R.'s judgement was 'faultless': in 1922 he had courageously opposed the councils; now he was equally courageously advocating office-acceptance (*This Hindu*, 18.10.35).

At the end of January 1936, C.R. attended a Congress meeting in Karaikudi and proposed that the TNCC recommend Nehru's name for the Congress chair. This was agreed to. Other provinces also suggesting his name, Nehru was formally elected.

Though back in action, C.R. was reluctant to resume charge of the TNCC. He supported the re-election of Satyamurti, who had become president on C.R.'s retirement. The re-election was not entirely smooth; reporting to Delhi, the Madras Chief Secretary referred to the possibility of 'a breach between the Brahman and non-Brahman elements of Congress'.[11]

Division was feared at the Lucknow session of the Congress. Jawaharlal, presiding, favoured socialism and opposed the idea of acceptance of office in provinces. The reverse was the inclination of C.R., Patel and Prasad. But unity prevailed, aided by the presence of Gandhi. Though formally out of Congress, Gandhi was willing to guide.

Prudently, a decision on the issue of office acceptance was put off. Nehru named a Working Committee in which the non-socialists – or the Gandhi-ites, conservatives, or the right wing, as they were variously called – predominated. It included C.R., Patel and Prasad.

Two months after Lucknow, C.R.said: 'The British perhaps hope for a quarrel among Congressmen… But we hope to disappoint them' [*The Hindu* 19.6.36]. 'Independence first' was C.R.'s simple formula for unity, and, in fact, Nehru's as well.

An open letter that Kasturba Gandhi wrote in the autumn of 1936 to her son Harilal, following an announcement that he was embracing Islam (the conversion was to prove temporary), touched C.R... 'It is liquid Mother-lava,' C.R. commented to Mahadev Desai, 'ancient pathos pouring out from the volcano of material anguish'.[12]

By declaring that they would stay out of it, the princes of India blocked a federation at the center envisaged by the Raj in the 1935 Government of India Act. The abortion of the federation, which was to be British-controlled, did not distress C.R., but he resented the princess' opposition to an all-India entity. 'The only solution is to wipe out the yellow patches.' He is supposed to have said, referring to the princely states, which were coloured yellow in maps of the period. [13]

Provincial elections were due at the end of 1936 or early in 1937. Congress was all set to contest them, but C.R. wanted a further step. With his approval, the TNCC urged the AICC to declare that Congress would accept office.

Then a sensitive nerve in C.R. was touched. Despite an appeal by him, his friend and Congress colleague, T.S.S.Rajan who represented Trichy in the Central Assembly, organized the defeat of Congress's official candidate in an election for the chairmanship of the Trichy municipality.

To this indiscipline C.R.'s response was nothing less than to resign — from the national Working Committee, from the Parliamentary Board, and from the TNCC. He even wanted to resign his membership of Congress, but Patel persuaded him against severing that primary link.

Duni Chand of Punjab Congress welcomed C.R.'s step as a 'shock treatment' against indiscipline, but everyone else protested. Kripalani, the AICC General Secretary, said that C.R.'s action was 'in excess of what the situation required,' and a correspondent wrote in *The Hindu* that it was 'not right for a general to flee from his post on account of slight defections in the camp.'

Patel spoke of 'a serious blow to the whole nation.' Censured by the Working Committee, Rajan resigned his Assembly seat and regretted that for the first time 'in over 20 years' he had disobeyed 'the greatest Congress leader of South India'; but he defended his role in the local election.

Patel, Prasad and Nehru remonstrated with C.R. at a Working Committee meeting in Bombay, following efforts that Prakasam and Satyamurti had made in Madras, but C.R. insisted that though he would 'remain a Congressman' he would 'cease to participate in Congress politics.'[14]

Following this decision, he was, by turns, both troubled and calm. To Bhulabhai Desai he wrote that an 'ugly crisis' had affected him. Though feeling he could have done nothing else, he had let colleagues down. He asked Desai to 'make up' for his 'naughtiness' (22.8.36).[15]

'What will you do?' he was asked. 'I have some interests in life other than politics,' C.R. replied. 'I have immediately some sick people to attend to (his second son Ramaswami was among them).... I shall not die of ennui. In fact politics left me no time for many things for which my soul craved' (*The Hindu*, 24.08.36).

He completed the commentary on the Gita begun a year earlier, observing that Krishna's words in the Gita were not 'a recruiting sergeant's declamation.'[16] He wrote short stories. And he turned to the Upanishads, finding their ancient authors 'as much inspired by constructive doubt as the most modern men of science.' To C.R. the heart of the Upanishads' teaching was that 'the good is one thing, the pleasant another.' [17.] In a letter to Mahadev Desai, he wrote:

> I believe with Bapu that most of our mythological stories are allegories, including the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Only I don't believe in the attempts sometimes made to weave a systematic allegory running throughout a book. I think it is a wild collection of isolated and valuable allegories.[18]

Congress needed a President for the coming year. Nehru indicated that he was willing to be chosen again, but two men were extremely keen for C.R. to wear the crown. One was Patel, who saw that a C.R. nomination, overdue in any case, would lead to a withdrawal of Jawaharlal's. The other was Satyamurti, who thought that with C.R. as President Congress was bound to accept office, a policy Satyamurti had long been advocating.

Primary membership of Congress sufficed for elevation to its chair, which is why Patel had insisted that C.R. retain it. He urged Gandhi to draft C.R. In a letter to Mahatma, Satyamurti did likewise. Enclosing what Satyamurti had penned, the Mahatma wrote to C.R. (21.11.36):

> My dear C.R....Read Satyamurti's letter and give me your decision. Needless to tell you that Sardar is desperately anxious for you to wear the thorny crown. I shall be pleased if you will, but I have no heart to press it on you.[19]

However, C.R. could not say, within three months of having 'retired,' that he was willing; and there is no evidence that he was.

Though urged by supporters, Patel declined to be a candidate himself. After consultations with Gandhi, he asked Congress to re-elect Nehru. Patel added, however,

> The Congress does not part with its ample power by electing any individual no matter who he is .... I can visualise that office-acceptance may be desirable. There may then be a sharp division of opinion between Pandit Jawaharlal and myself.

So Nehru, who clarified that his re-election would not necessarily be a vote of socialism, was given the crown for the third time.

C.R. went to Travancore, where the young Maharaja, encouraged by his Dewan, C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, had by a proclamation thrown open all the temples in the state's charge to Harijans.

At a meeting in Trivandrum, C.R. was described as 'the author of the temple entry movement' (*The Hindu*, 30.11.36)

The proclamation had stirred him. Offering sacred ash to 40 young Harijan boys, he took them to the famed Sri Padmanabhaswami temple, which had not seen 'untouchables' for a thousand years.

'God be thanked,' C.R. said, 'and may your Maharaja live long. This is the happiest movement of my life.'

If Congress won the elections in Madras and accepted office, who would head its government? Satyamurti was a candidate but in a party election Muthuranga Mudaliar had defeated him, and there was a question whether Prakasam, who led Congressmen in the Telugu districts, would serve under Satyamurti.

Perturbed by the possibility of a bitter rivalry among Madras's Congressmen, Patel saw C.R. as the answer. So did many in the South, including *The Hindu's* Kasturi Srinivasan, the Liberal leader, T.R. Venkatarama Sastri, P. Subbaroyan, the former First Minister who had recently joined Congress, and Kala Venkata Rao of Andhra. A bid was launched to enlist C.R.

In the middle of December 1936, Patel, visiting the South talked with C.R. during the short stretch between Renigunta station where C.R. had joined him, and Madras. The talk obviously had some effect, for on the following day C.R. said at a Madras meeting that his retirement did not mean that he would 'continue to sit at home' if he found 'that (he) should resume active work' (*The Hindu* 15.12.36).

At Trichy, Patel told local Congressmen that if 'they had not forced him to resign, Mr. C. Rajagopalachari would have been unanimously elected President of the Congress long since' (*The Hindu* 16.12.36). After delivering the rebuke, Patel proceeded to Faizpur in Maharashtra for Congress's annual session. C.R. returned to the Gita, on which he lectured in Madras on 24 December.

On 16 January *The Hindu* announced that C.R. would 'come out of his retirement' and enter the Assembly elections. 'Leading Congressmen both in his province and elsewhere have long been pressing him,' the newspaper added. In Bombay, Patel declared that

C.R. would stand from the University constituency. Satyamurti, wh had hoped to represent that seat, had stepped aside, Patel adde (*The Hindu* 17.1.37).

Five days earlier, C.R. has said to Gandhi, who changed trai at Madras station en route to Travancore: 'I am under pressure.' Th two met again on 22 January when Gandhi stopped in Madras o his way back from Travancore. 'Ah,' said Gandhi, 'now I know wh you meant by pressure.' 'What do you think of my decision?' C.R asked. 'You are free to do as you like,' replied the Mahatma.[20]

C.R. liked the idea of entering the Assembly, but he had onl recently, and categorically, 'retired.' For some days he was emba rassed. 'I am glad I have not got any communication from you makin fun of my sudden fall,' he said in a letter (21.1.37) to Devadas, addin 'I have been rushed into it and I have hardly four weeks to w all the elections.....'

The 'fall' was welcomed all over the South and beyond. 'Arju resumes the bow,' said the *Mahratta* of Poona. On 19 January he fil his nomination. Two came forward to oppose him, P. Narayana Kur and S.Rajagopalan, the latter promising to prevent the Harijan refor that C.R. had sponsored.

The seat had 8,109 voters. C.R.'s canvassing consisted of a sing press statement, in which he asked his voters to 'bless an experime in poor man's electioneering' and pardon his not sending even a lett to all of them, for that 'would mean nearly a thousand rupees' (*T Hindu*, 25.1.37).

C.R. conducted the Congress campaign from the bare floor his son Krishnaswami's modest new house in Tyagarajanagar. Prakasa and Satyamurti ably backed him. The main opposition was fro the Justice Party, which had been in office for years.

But this time the franchise was wider than it had ever bee and Congress was in the fray for the first time. In speeches acro the province, C.R. said that votes against Congress were votes f national dishonour.

Votes for Congress went into yellow boxes, votes for Just into red ones. When all ballots were counted, Congress had w 159 seats, Justice 16, the Muslim League 10. C.R. received 5,326 vo Kurup 372, Rajagopalan 270. The Raja of Bobbili, the outgoing Ch Minister, lost to V.V.Giri of Congress by a margin of over 5,000 vot

'The magnitude of the Congress victory was greater tha or anyone else expected,' Lord Erskine, the Governor, wrote George V.[21] C.R. spoke of 'the irresistibility of a just cause' (*The Hin* 2.3.37).

Congress had won in most parts of India, not just in the Sou

Madras's Congress legislators met on 10 March to elect their leader. Prakasam, Chairing the meeting, proposed C.R.'s name. Loud and prolonged applause broke out. 'I take it that you are for electing Mr. Rajagopalachari unanimously,' Prakasam said.

'Yes,' said voices from everywhere. When Prakasam formally put the proposal to vote, cries of 'All' rent the air.

Addressing the legislators, C.R. said that he would break down if he recalled 'the adventurous days when Mr.Prakasam and he first conversed together about the great and wonderful programme laid down by Mahatma Gandhi,' and added:

> Anybody who is anxious for any office proves that he is unfit for that office. It is easy to fast on an Ekadasi day sitting on a plank; it is difficult to fast sitting in the Modern Café. (*The Hindu,* 11.3.37).

The MLAs wanted to know whether Congress would accept office. 'The chances are fifty-fifty,' C.R. told them, adding that they should obey the AICC's decision. But they could make their recommendation to the AICC. The MLAs voted in favour of taking office. So did the TNCC and the Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee. Most of the South's taluk and district committees of Congress had done so already.

However, Nehru, the Congress President, had said at Faizpur in December that 'the only logical consequence of the Congress policy...is to have nothing to do with office or ministry.'[22] Thinking differently, the Mahatma was ready to counsel acceptance provided the Raj gave an assurance that Governors would not use their special powers against the advice of Ministers.

Meeting in Delhi in the third week of March, the AICC disagreed with Nehru and authorized office acceptance if Gandhi's condition was met.

At meetings with Erskine, C.R. probed the Raj's willingness to satisfy Gandhi. The Governor, who was of aristocratic Scots lineage, independent, hopeful of a rising career in British politics, and head of the presidency since 1935, probed C.R. He had heard of him as 'a wholehearted disciple of Gandhi' with 'a visionary and impractical turn of mind.'

However, after their third meeting, which Erskine found 'very amicable,' he wrote to Linlithgow, the Viceroy, that he 'liked the old boy.'[23] C.R. asked if the Governor would give a written assurance that his special powers would not be used unless orders were issued by the Viceroy or the Secretary of State.

The Viceroy, whose advice Erskine sought, ruled that out.

Instead he asked the Governor to find out from C.R. if Congress would be satisfied by a statement from Erskine that he would be 'ready to work with any party taking up office.' C.R.'s reply, given after consulting Gandhi, was that this would not be enough.

In Madras and six other provinces, Governors formally invited the leader of the Congress legislature party to form a government. C.R. and his counterparts formally sought the assurance that Gandhi had stipulated. When it was not forthcoming, they said they could not accept office.

In Madras, Erskine asked Srinivasa Sastri, the Liberal leader, if he would form a caretaker government. Saying that he was old and ill and that accepting the offer would make him unpopular, Sastri refused. However, Sir K.V.Reddy, asked next by the Governor, agreed.

The caretaker ministries satisfied no one. Ready to settle with the Raj for somewhat less than Gandhi's minimum, C.R. went to the village of Tithal on the Gujarat coast to confer with the Mahatma. Gandhi said he wanted a sign from Britain that it should cooperate.

The Raj showed movement. In the House of Commons, Zetland, the Secretary of State, uttered encouraging words. Then the Viceroy gave Britain's formal response to Gandhi's demand:

> There is no foundation for any suggestion that the Governor is free, or entitled, or would have the power to interfere with the day-to-day administration of a province outside the limited range of the responsibilities specially confided to him.

This sufficed for Gandhi. When the Working Committee conferred in Wardha, C.R. argued for taking office. No one opposed him, not even Nehru. Gandhi had convinced Jawaharlal against defying the rest. On 5 July 1937 the Working Committee sanctioned the formation of ministries.

Two days later, C.R., five times a prisoner of the Raj, was sent for by Erskine and asked to form a cabinet. C.R. agreed and became Prime Minister (that was the designation used) of Madras. His life had entered a new phase. Now he would govern. Interrupted during the War and enriched, in 1947, by freedom, the phase would last until 1954.

For the present he was launched into an unusual experiment of a dual relationship with the Raj, combining trust and struggle, participation and opposition.

'You know how my hope is centred in you,' said the Mahatma to him in a telegram. 'May god bless your effort.'[24]

Notes

1. C.R. to Mashruwala, 19.1.35, in Ashram File, 'Gandhi Seva Sangh.'
2. Ashram File, 'Retirement 1935.'
3. Ibid
4. CWMG 61:28.
5. Quotes from Ashram Files, 'Retirement' and 'AICC 1935.'
6. Both letters in Ashram file, 'Retirement.'
7. Gandhi to Munshi, CWMG 60:421.
8. CWMG 61:411.
9. Letter of 30.9.35, Rajagopalachari Papers.
10. Ashram File, 'AICC 1935'.
11. Brackenbury to Home Secretary, Delhi, 3.3.36, Fortnightly Reports of 1936, National Archives.
12. C.R. quoted by Mahadev Desai to Devadas, 6.10.36, Devadas Gandhi Papers.
13. Nittoor Srinivasa Rau told the author in 1973 that he saw C.R.'s remark written on a postcard.
14. All quotes relating to the Rajan episode from *The Hindu*, August 1936.
15. C.R.'s letter in Desai Papers, NMML, New Delhi.
16. C.R. to Mahadev Desai, October, 1936, Devadas Gandhi Papers.
17. C.R. *Upanishads*, Hindustan
18. Letter of August 1936, Devadas Gandhi Papers.
19. Rajagopalachari Papers.
20. Related to author in 1973 by P. Ramamurti, the Communist leader, who was present at both conversations.
21. Letter of 14.4.37 in Erskine Papers, India Office Library, London.
22. Nehru quoted in Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement*, Publications Division, vol.3, p.217.
23. Erskine to Linlithgow, 1.5.37, Erskine Papers, India Office Library, London.
24. Gandhi's message quoted in letter of 16.7.37 from Mahadev Desai to G.D. Birla in Birla, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, Vakils, Bombay, 1968, p.213.

Premchand: A Life

Amrit Rai

12

Accompanied by his wife and three-year old daughter Kamala, broken in health, and laden with bag and baggage, Premchand left Basti to arrive in Gorakhpur on 18 August 1916 at about five in the afternoon.

The residence he had been allotted was to be vacated only the next day, and he would therefore have preferred to travel a day later. He had never been one to enjoy travelling and was, on this occasion, also encumbered with the whole family and all the household effects.

But his wife had already packed everything, and they had to leave when they did. However, Premchand remained apprehensive about the night they must spend stranded between their previous home and the next one.

And his fears, indeed, proved true. Right on that verandah where they had been accommodated for the night, his older son Dhunnu (formally to be called Sripat) announced his intention to be born! It was a strange place, and the dead of night, with not a single friend or acquaintance around, and they hadn't the least idea even of where to find a doctor or a midwife. Quite a crisis it was, but all went well thanks to the great help spontaneously offered by many of his new colleagues. One of them was even kind enough to take them all home and put them up in his house. Such a warm introduction to the new place left Premchand utterly grateful. It was only gradually that he was to discover that such warmth on the part of his colleagues was due as much to the personality of the head-master Bechan Lal as to a sense of community that prevailed in the school generally.

Bechan Lal was quite as warm and affectionate as Bhikhan Lal, the headmaster at Basti, had been curt and rude. Not only was Bechan Lal kind of heart but also sweet of tongue. As for discipline, all he was concerned with was that all his colleagues should work hard and attend to their duties—and he trusted them completely to do so.

Premchand had been appointed the Second Master, immediately below Bechan Lal, on a salary of sixty rupees per month. His free and candid temperament was fully matched by his headmaster's, and the two got along famously. Due to Bechan Lal's kindness, Premchand shortly received a raise of ten rupees per month, after he had spent a month in Allahabad being trained in First Aid; Bechan Lal had not only recommended his name for this course but actually pushed him into it, notwithstanding his wife's poor health. And a little over a year after this, he also appointed Premchand the superintendent of the school boarding house, which meant a further raise in salary of fifteen rupees per month.

Premchand was well contented. A kind headmaster friendly colleagues, affectionate and obedient pupils and such a nice place to live and work in. He had taken to it at first sight. Even when he had visited the place for just a day about six months previously, he had felt tempted.

This Normal School sprawling over scores of acres of land was a very different proposition from the noisy and crowded neighbourhood in the heart of Basti. On one side of the school here was the large open ground of the local Idgah, and on the other, the collector's bungalow. And there were wide spaces in between.

Of course, Gorakhpur wasn't new to him. He was familiar with each one of its ways and bye-ways. This was where he had spent several years of his childhood, roaming about, listening to and later reading the tales from *Talism-e-Hoshruba* and *Haremsara*, and watching for hours altogether bouts of kite-flying in Bale Miyan Ka Maidan, all the while feeling miserable because he had no money for kites himself. Also, it was here that he had smoked his first cigarette, at the age of thirteen, and here, too, that he was probably initiated into the delights of filthy talk in the company of the usual street urchins. And it was here again, that he had learnt his first lessons in English, at the Rawat Pathshala.

He associated Gorakhpur, thus, with a number of bitter-sweet memories from his past life. He had just passed his eighth standard examination here when he had had to accompany his father back to Banaras. Just as he had enrolled himself in the ninth standard, he had also been married off. His father had died shortly afterwards.

And, with one thing following another, a lot of water had since then flown under the bridge. And now, here he was, back in Gorakhpur again. And he liked being back, feeling somehow a little lighter both in mind and in body.

However, the domestic feud between his wife and his step-mother still persisted. The root cause for it still was the unwillingness on the part of the latter to relinquish any of her former rights and privileges. On the other hand, it was preposterous to expect his wife not to want to be the mistress of her own house. While Premchand understood the situation perfectly he hardly knew how to help it. After all, all his wife's endeavours were directed ultimately at ordering the household better and improving the domestic economy. That was, surely, an end much to be desired. It would free him eventually, from daily domestic worries in order to devote himself more fully to his work. He already owed a great unexpressed debt to his wife for her efforts in this direction. However, it was best not to offend anybody. That was why he had, with the passage of time, grown more and more aloof from this discord. And yet, he was but human. Somewhat short-tempered himself, he would on occasion grow terribly annoyed and sometimes would even burst out in anger. But soon, he would get back to his work. That was his true refuge and salvation. That work alone was the true joy of life was a conviction he had long held. Constant and ceaseless occupation with work was the only road to happiness. It also left him relatively unmoved by these constant in-law quarrels.

But once, he did, lose his temper with his step-mother. Having failed twice the school leaving examination, Mahatab, his step-brother, had proceeded to Lucknow in order to take a one-year course in typing and book-keeping. As always, Premchand had paid for him. But when he returned to Gorakhpur at the completion of his course, Premchand seemed to detect in something said by his step-mother the undertone of a suggestion that he, Premchand, now planned to appropriate a part of his step-brother's salary in recompense for what he had spent on him earlier. This infuriated Premchand and he had a mighty row with the step-mother. This was ingratitude of the worst kind, a cruel innuendo which was beyond his forbearance. Still enraged, he came and declared to his wife that he'd rather take poison and end his life then ever have to live on some-one else's wages!

His anger soon blew over, however, and the episode left no rancour behind in his heart. He continued to be as affectionate towards Mahatab as before and as responsible for him. And on his part, Mahatab, though he might not have got along too well with

Premchand's wife, always was respectful to him and ever retained for him a great deal of natural love and affection.

Premchand could now see a marked improvement in his circumstances. His health was better, which was a major gain, and he found the school more congenial as well. He had come to know Mahavir Prasad Poddar, and through him, a new language, Hindi, lay open to him. Premchand had great expectations of it. Unlike Urdu, Hindi wasn't a language in which the author had to pay himself for the publication of his book, and thereafter be impelled by the desperately low sales to keep prodding the publisher to do better. The sale of two hundred copies of a book in a whole year could be regarded as a remarkable achievement in Urdu. The situation in Hindi was bound to be better, Premchand reasoned to himself, or else his publisher wouldn't be chasing him so vigorously. He had already produced for him a short book on Sheikh Sa'adi, as well as translations of some stories by Tolstoy. The Hindi *Prem Pachisi* was in press. And these must have been selling well, Premchand inferred, or else the publisher wouldn't have asked him for a new novel!

All this was, naturally, gratifying. What more could any writer wish for than a situation in which he himself felt a zest for writing and found, too, that writing came easy, with a publisher waiting at the door-step, and his fame spreading beyond one language to several others. Besides the Hindi version, *Prem Pachisi* was soon going to come out in Marathi as well and some of his stories published in various journals were getting translated into Gujarati. Heady stuff, all this!

And, to top it all, there was now, after long days of weary despondency, a new development in the national life. What a strange coincidence that a downward phase in the national movement synchronized more or less with a downward trend in Premchand's health, and that a new awakening in the nation was now felt by Premchand literally on his pulse. The upward swing in his health was definitely due, in part, to this resurgence of the nation.

But that's what he was like. He had never known to confine himself in a narrow and individualistic world. He was inveterately a family man—a man of the family and for the family. He would gladly embrace all its worries and problems and responsibilities rather than be alone and carefree.

And the nation for him was one large family. All its joys and sorrows were his joys and sorrows. The thread of natural affinity that bound him to his own family was what bound him to this larger family as well.

Someone like him should perhaps have turned to active politics, as an agitator, as an organizer. But Premchand was aware of his weaknesses as well.

His weakest spot, as it happened, was the condition of his household; two little children, wife, step-mother and step-brother, and he himself the sole bread-winner. Another weakness was his own temperament. He was most unlike the seasoned political campaigners, who were all masters of the art of wheeling-dealing and maneouvring. That was, in fact, another world altogether. He would have been utterly at a loss there.

Undeniably, he was moved profoundly by public events. What this signified to him was that if he were to try he might be able, in turn, to move many others equally—not through public oration but through his pen. His intimate interest in politics was reflected in his writings. It was through his writings that he gave of the best of himself in the cause of the nation's freedom and its future.

The next annual session of the Congress was to be held in Lucknow. It proved to be extraordinarily successful. The Congress and the Muslim League were reconciled at it, as were the rival factions of the Moderates and the Radicals within the Congress. On the same dais now sat Rasbehari Ghosh and Surendranath Bannerjee, together with Tilak and Kharpade. This was the same Rasbehari Ghosh who hadn't allowed Tilak even to speak at the session in Surat nine years ago. It was gratifying to see such bitter enemies now sharing the same platform. Mrs. Besant was there, too. The Muslims were represented by the Raja of Mahmudabad, Ejaz Rasool, and Jinnah, among others. Also present was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, whose fame had preceded him.

It was here that some representatives from Bihar met Gandhi and narrated to him the tales of woe of the peasants of Champaran. Their exploitation by the indigo planters staggered belief. The peasants were worse off than even slaves. They had to take it all without even a murmur of protest. Occasionally, a white Saheb would openly shoot dead a peasant, with no one to ask any questions.

Eventually, Gandhi went to Champaran and launched his first Satyagraha movement in India. It met with extraordinary success. Next, Gandhi went to Kheda in Gujarat and waged a battle on behalf of the peasants there.

These were the latest episodes in the national awakening, and were watched closely by an observer far removed from the world of active politics. As soon as Gandhi had arrived on the scene

Premchand had begun to follow his activities with keen interest. Some intuition had told him that this new leader was destined to achieve great things. Utterly different from the usual armchair politicians, Gandhi interpreted politics to be a mode of serving the people. He moved among the poor and the wretched, tried to understand their problems, shared in their sufferings and sorrows, and inspired them to form the front-line of the nationalist struggle. It was just such a patriotic *mahatma* that Premchand had created in his novel *Jalwa-e-Isar* in the character of Bala Ji. Bala Ji was Vivekananda. Bala Ji was Tilak. Bala Ji was Gandhi. With the change of times his image changed too, though the substance remained very much the same.

The ideals of truth, non-violence and renunciation which Gandhi was now advocating to the nation were precisely the ones Premchand had cherished, for he too had travelled the same path, more or less, in order to arrive at them. He, too, had read the moral tales of Tolstoy and been influenced by them in his writings. He had also adapted twenty-three of these stories to the Indian context and published them in a volume under the title *Prem Prabhakar*. Nearly all the best-known moral tales of Tolstoy were included in this collection, including 'That Whereby Men Live', 'Neglect A Fire and It Will Not Be Quenched', 'Children May Be Wiser Than Their Elders', 'How Much Land Does A Man Require?', 'The Grain That Was Like An Egg', and 'The Godson'.

The moral precepts embodied in these stories were no mere cliches for Premchand but truths which he had re-discovered for himself through experience and reflection. These truths had permeated so deeply into his sensibility as to become a part of his creed and his vision and they are manifested naturally in his writings. Stories like 'Shankhanad', 'Panch Parmeshwar,' and 'Mahatirtha,' which were written during this period, are inspired by this vision and could not but have arisen from the profoundest convictions on the part of the author.

Nor was there any gulf between his life and his writings. The very stuff of daily life was transmuted into literature, when endowed with vigour and vitality, tried in the clear fire of reason, and lent the hue of dreams. Literature re-presents a nobler version of life, and a writer may often seek to achieve the same nobility in his own life. For it is the writer's own life which imparts to his literature such force as it has.

As for Premchand, he has adopted for himself the quietly disciplined life of a peasant who sets off for his fields with his oxen and plough even before the crack of dawn.

He gets up before sunrise and having washed and dressed goes out for an hour's walk, for which he need not now go beyond the huge grounds of the school. By the time he gets back, the rest of the household is up and about. He then attends to some domestic chores, for he doesn't wish to depend overmuch on the servant. He makes his own bed and washes his own clothes. His wife doesn't approve, but he would not change old habits. He hasn't forgotten that he was himself once employed at the paltry salary of five rupees a month, and was hardly better off than a servant. In any case, where's the harm in attending to one's own daily needs.

For writing, the time that suits him best is early in the day. Until it is time for him to go to the school he sits at his desk, writing. He then gets up and gets dressed, and is off.

Punctuality has become second nature with him. It's doubly important now, for he must set a good example before his students who are trainee teachers and will shortly be required to provide examples of this kind themselves in their own schools. They must grasp that to waste time is a crime. No nation has ever progressed which hasn't valued punctuality.

One of his students, Manjoorul Haque, recalls:

> Premchand was generally in the habit of arriving in school on the dot. As soon as the bell rang, he'd set out at a nice leisurely pace such as usually associated with poets. He came to school usually with his head uncovered, his hair dishevelled, and wearing a *dhoti* and a coat which was often unbuttoned. He thus made quite a picture. The students respected him more than they respected anyone else. He taught my class history. Often, he would read a passage from the text-book and then cite evidence from other sources in order to controvert the given version. He would also point out that several of the episodes narrated in the book had been included merely for the purpose of creating divisions between the Hindus and the Muslims.... And, before the bell rang, he would clarify that all that he had said was for our personal benefit and not to be reproduced in the examinations, unless we wanted to fail!

The school had its own restraints and risks, but these did not prevent Premchand from giving a nationalistic content to his teaching as far as possible. For example, he pointed out one day what had hardly been noticed in those times some sixty years ago, that the incident of the Black Hole of Calcutta was a total fabrication, a mere invention on the part of an English officer designed to provide some kind of a moral justification for the English annexation of Bengal.

In short, his lectures were a source of all kinds of fascinating information. He spent his energy not in dictating notes to his students nor in drawing all kinds of maps and figures on the black-board, but in trying to make his students sound in body and mind. And when he set out for his rounds of inspection in the boarding house, the inmates would not fear him but welcome him as some elder relative with whom they could freely talk about their comforts as well as discomforts.

As time passed his students grew increasingly fond of him, and would want to serve him in some way or the other. But Premchand, as someone who didn't even relish the idea of putting his own servant to work for him, would have none of it, except in one matter. He would freely and frequently ask one or two of his students to prepare fair copies of his stories, and this was all the *gurudakshina* or tribute he would ever accept from them. He would be highly pleased with a student who did this job well. If this was a kind of bribe, he was only too happy to accept it.

Another of his students writes:

> As soon as he entered the class, an air of keen expectancy would prevail and everyone would be all ears. He did not always restrict himself to the prescribed syllabus but very often would rather begin to talk about whatever he happened to be interested in or whatever his students requested him to talk about. If anything amusing came up in the course of the lecture, he would laugh freely and without restraint. He did not stand in awe of anyone. Once, some official came to inspect our school. Our headmaster Babu Bechan Lal, who was a meek and simple man, was a little worried. Several students, too, put in an unusually smart appearance, but not our dear teacher who looked just the same as always—bareheaded, dishevelled, and with his coat unbuttoned. The inspector visited our class, without any perceptible effect on our teacher. The two exchanged a few words in English, after which the inspector went away.

Such natural simplicity and such a candid temperament are relatively rare, and these were the very qualities which attracted his students irresistibly to him. In his conduct he was just and impartial to everyone. It was by dint of these virtues that Premchand proved to be a highly successful superintendent of the boarding house for full three years for, temperamentally, he must have been quite unsuited to the job. He was entirely devoid of any administrative ability. But where administrative ability fails goodwill may succeed and he had a large measure of goodwill towards everyone.

Jokhu was his personal servant. Though officially employe by the boarding house, he also served as a domestic servant f some extra payment. Subhan, a Muslim, was a cook in the scho mess. Muhammad worked as the book-binder for the school. Ar Premchand treated all of them with kindness and sympathy. Ofte he would even help them financially. Muhammad the book-bind was a particularly sad-looking fellow, and Premchand even wro a story based on his life. ("The story 'Daftari' is taken straight fro life. There's hardly any invention in it." Premchand to Imtiaz A Taj, 25 September 1919). Muhammad had married twice. He ha little money and many mouths to feed. To make matters worse h wife was vain, querulous and a spendthrift. He would often be sho of money, and there'd be constant rows in his home. Premchan would help him out and many others like him. He would nev remind him to repay the loans, but wait for him and other simil beneficiaries to pay him back when they could. Sometimes, a loa would turn out to be a bad debt. But what Premchand would min then was not the loss of money but his wife's displeasure and h admonitions.

With the march of the times, his nationalist feelings had al grown stronger. The concept of Hindu-Muslim unity had now take deep roots in his mind. And, just as any principle that he cam to believe in was soon fully reflected in his conduct, so in this ca as well, he left no stone unturned during his three-year term a the superintendent of the school boarding house to promote fraternal feeling between students of the two communities. A Mohammad Hanif Khan, a student of his during this period, record

> He was a great supporter of the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity. Of the 150-odd students who were undergoing teacher's training at the Normal School, Gorakhpur, at this time, about thirty were Muslims. During the academic session I spent there, from July 1916 to April 1917, there wasn't a single incident of discord between the two communities. If ever anyone did something which might provoke communal sentiments, he not only put down the incident but also endeavoured to eradicate the very basis of such differences.

Considerations of high and low, Hindu and Muslim, an untouchability were all anathema to Premchand. He never impos any restrictions, either now or later, on the company his childr kept or the friends they made. Not only had he himself grown u in a similarly free atmosphere, but he also believed that to encourage this kind of discrimination in the minds of his children would have been a grave social injustice. He believed that it was best for the healthy mental development of children to have the freedom of being able to associate and play with just anyone they liked, and that to limit this freedom in any way was to do them a serious disservice. His daughter Kamala preferred to spend most of her time at Subhan the Muslim cook's house. Whenever possible, she would pick up her younger brother Dhunnu, now two or three years old, and reach Subhan's house where she would spend hours altogether. Both Subhan's daughter Sariya and his son Siraju were close friends of hers. So, for that matter, was Khuddan, son of the book-binder, also a Muslim, but she felt most at home at Subhan's.

When their mother gave Sariya and Siraju something to eat, she would also give some to Kamala. One day, Kamala returned home with a chapati still clutched in her hands. Her mother was greatly enraged, and slapped Kamala several times. But the incident had been forgotten within a few days, and everything went on as before.

There was some open space in front of his house which Premchand himself would often sweep with a big broom. It had several mango, neem, and jackfruit trees. A few chairs and one or two charpoys always lay in their shade. This area served as Premchand's drawing-room as well as a resting place.

On returning from school in early afternoon Premchand would take a light tea and would then go to the town to buy vegetables and groceries though this would not be necessary every day. On coming back, he would settle down in the shade of the tree, glance at newspapers and magazines, converse with friends and visitors, and have the whole place resounding with his loud laughter. At sun-set he would retire to his study within and spend some time in reading and writing. He would then have dinner and after walking for a little while in front of the house, would go to bed at about ten o'clock. As a chronic sufferer from digestive disorders, he wasn't permitted to stay up late nor did he wish to, for he preferred, on the other hand, to get up early.

Such was his daily routine—day after day after day... A highly well regulated life, which was more the life of a peasant than that of an 'artist', with the difference that instead of a spade he wielded a pen.

Translated from Hindi by Harish Trivedi

❑

Benudhar Sarma

Tirthanath Sarma

In Calcutta—the Mighty Portals of History and Politics

Benudhar was whiling away his days after completing the matriculation examination from the Sivasagar Government School; then, mainly because of the cajoling of Radhika Nath Sarma, the founder of Phuleswari High School, he joined as a temporary teacher in the same school just taste to taste teaching. 'Taste', because Benu Sarma was never interested in teaching or any other job; he joined Phuleswari High School just to have a feel of it . And hardly had he completed three months, when he put in his papers. He had a taste of it. Results of the matriculation examinations were declared and he was through in the second division. In those days only a few students passed in the first division. So, for one who was more interested in social functions the text-books, who often preferred to remain immersed in literature, and took part in the mock-durbar of nava-ratna[1], it would have been impossible even to pass for a person without the calibre of a Benudhar.

But this success led to a problem of sorts for the ambitious and talented Benudhar – *Atah parang kim* – what next? The agriculturist family was not in a position to support his education in Cotton College (Guwahati) or in a Calcutta college. His close relatives were also not able to help him. Those who were able did not come forward either. So, his guardians and well-wishers were anxious as to how to provide for his college education. Pundit Gauridutta Sarma sympathized with his dear student and brought his case to the notice of the educationist Gobinda Bezbaruah.The latter offered him the job of a Sanskrit teacher in the Bezbaruah School. But Benudhar showed no interest. In the first place, he did not like Sanskrit and probably at that moment he was a little euphoric after passing matriculation. So he wrote on a card —"regret could not accept your appointment," and dropped it in a mail-box.

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[1] In the upper classes of the high school, nine of them sat on one bench and christened themselves after the Navaratnas of Vikramaditya's court; Benudhar was Kalidas.

Purnananda Pathak, ex-secretary of Asom Sahitya Sabha and an advocate of repute, was a respected relative of Benudhar Sarma. Apart from being a relative, he also was a well-wisher of this talented youngster. Pathak interacted with Gobinda Bezbaruah and wrote to Benudhar: "You must join the Bezbaruah school at the earliest." At least that was more pragmatic than doing nothing. And if not in the academic year of 1915, he would be able to join in 1916. The salary he could get during these months would be of some help. That is how Pathak planned. After receiving this letter, Benudhar shed his ego and straight away came to Jorhat.

After two months of teaching, Benudhar was no more interested to carry on. Not to miss the academic session of 1916, he left for Calcutta on June 23rd with a few friends. In Cotton College at Gauhati, those with first division got admission easily. Those with second division got into if they went begging for seats. It is felt that Benudhar went to Calcutta not taking all these things into account. It was simply the attraction of Calcutta. It might have been the abandoned Capital by then, but Calcutta far outdid the Capital in all respects. It was the anvil of Indian politics in those days; all westerly winds from across the seas hit the city. Added to that, was the comment by the great Gokhale—"What Bengal thinks today India thinks tomorrow"— which enthused young Assamese hearts to no end. Besides, in this very Calcutta, the Assamese literature made its resurgence in the nineteenth century. Starting from Gunabhiram Baruah to Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Hemchandra Goswami and Chandrakumar Agarwallah of the *Jonaki* age, Assamese students carried on with their literary persuits in this very Calcutta. This inspiring ambience persisted in the second decade of the twentieth century as well. Assamese books in those days had to be printed in the presses in Calcutta. The frequent visits by writers in this connection made the city a meeting place of great minds. Students with some means thronged to Calcutta for all these reasons. Presidency College was the first choice; if they couldn't get in there only they went to other colleges.

There was a mess in 43, Amherst Street, where several Assamese boarders were put up. They studied in different colleges, pursued literature, and attended big meetings. Benudhar also initially joined them.

He made a round of several colleges to get admission. He was helped by the company and advice of one Bangshidhar Sarma of 43, Amherst Street. But he did not make any attempt to join the Presidency College. It was like seeking loan from a noveau riche as he would recollect later in *Jayanti* (10th year 5th issue). Bidyasagar, Rippon and City College were famous names but the clerks in those offices told him there was no seat. At last he approached Bangabashi College. Benudhar went straight to the Principal Girish Basu. To his queries in Bengali, Benudhar replied in English. Principal Basu came to know the student was an Assamese boy who did not know Bengali. Basu was generous and judicious. Learning Benudhar's plight, he called the clerk and instructed him to give him a seat. The clerk raised a feeble objection but Basu was categorical. Benudhar got admission in I.A. first year and chose Logic, History and Botany as his subjects apart from English and the Mother Tongue. He recollects later "... as if I have taken poison by this admission, in 'this is a gunda college', (in those days Bangabashi had the sobriquet of 'gunda college'); all would laugh at it as the worst institution the way Bezbaruah school and Upen Baruah school in Jorhat were nick-named colleges."

The insult was not without some grounds. There was simply no discipline in the college. The professor's lecture would drown in the noise of the students. The students missed no opportunity to tease the meek-looking teachers. For Benudhar the salt in the wound was Assamese-bashing by some professors. Amidst all these he came across an old issue of *Hindu Patriot* where in an editorial on the rebellion of 1857 there was a comment "There was a slight commotion in the effeminate province of Assam." Benudhar was restive. Amidst the insulting comments of some professors and some silly class-mates, this shallow comment in the *Hindu Patriot* was a blessing in disguise. Benudhar the archer prepared. He became a regular in the Imperial Library and began to gather arrows to target his adversaries. He went through countless number of histories, old issues of newspapers and reports. The historian Benudhar was born.

That mess of 43, Amherst Street was a meeting place of sorts for the Assamese students. Apart from the boarders, students from other messes also assembled there. It being the happening place, gentlemen from Assam going to the city for various business also paid a visit there. This is how Benudhar and others got the company, valuable advice and inspiration from the likes of Phanidhar Chaliha (later Raibahadur), Mahamahopadhyay Dhireswaracharjya, Nabin Bordoloi, Chandranath Sharma, Sarbeswar Kotoky and others.

From this home one enterprising youngman Lohit Chandra

Bhuyan ran a business establishment with the name—'Friends' Assam Agency'. He himself wrote beginners' books for minors. Otherwise he dealt in textiles. Lohit Bhuyan also published a children's monthly, *Akon*. Edited by Pundit Hemchandra Goswami, *Akon* had contributions from many famous as well as upcoming names of the time. Friends' Assam Agency also published a few books like Padmadhar Chaliha's collection of lyrics – *Phulani*. It was advertised in *Alochani* published from Dibrugarh. Some of the other publications were *Asomiya Ingrajir Anubad* by Chandra Nath Sharma and *Bhagyaporikhya* by Chandrdhar Baruah. Benudhar devoted a lot of time in readying materials for *Akon*, in its proof-reading and so on. This is how he made his entry into the sanctum sanctorum of literature. For various reasons, the business of Friends' Assam Agency did not last for long. The mess at 43, Amherst Street was termed Assam Mess as its boarders were overwhelmingly from Assam. Many boarders from this Assam Mess later carved a niche for themselves in the literary, scholarly and political fields in later life. Benudhar Sharma was one of them. Krishnakanta Handique, Dr. Bhubaneswar Baruah, Padmadhar Chaliha and Kameswar Das are some other prominent names. Ranakanta Borkakoty also spent some six months as a guest here. Jatindranath Duarah, Banikanta Kakoti and Mahichandra Bora often came to meet Krishnakanta Handique. The very mention of these names is enough to give an idea of the fine ambience of the Assam Mess.

Benudhar sat for I.A. examinations in 1918. But he did not succeed this time. He admits very openly why he could not "In 43 , Amherst Street I just did not study at all. I spent the two years in scores of outside activities and loitering around." ('43 Amherst Street', *Jayanti*, 10th year, 4th issue). He adds: " I used to visit the Imperial Library, then there was mess-marketing, reading proof for *Akon* and *Bioscope*, above all...." He came home on a vacation, went to Calcutta again and this time stayed at 1/11 Harrison Road (now Mahatma Gandhi Road). Next year he passed in second division and took admission in B.A. He carried on with his studies amidst sundry other interests. Around this time the printing of *Sanmilan Prabandhawali* of Asom Chatra Sanmilan began. Its second conference was held at Jorhat. In this connection he translated a few short stories into Assamese. These were published as a collection with the title *Mangalatir Kanthimala* in 1947. All these stories were translated in those Calcutta days. At around the same time, he contributed quite a few articles, stories and discourses in *Banhi* and *Chetana* edited by Lakshminath Bezbaruah. He met Bezbaruah first at Guwahati during the Asom Chatra Sanmilan in 1916, but felt the warmth of his inspiring company while staying in Calcutta. Those Calcutta days, therefore, were Benudhar's stepping stones to the hall of literature.

At the mighty portal of politics

Mention may be made of another aspect of Benudhar's life that he acquired in Calcutta.That is a revolutionary zeal to bring swaraj in the country bringing an end to the British-Raj. That was the time when Annie Besant's name swept through the country. The fiery speeches of Surendranath Bannerjee, Bipin Chandra Paul etc enthused the young minds. There were meetings and rallies in the halls and maidans of Calcutta almost everyday. Benudhar Sarma regularly attended those meetings. The small man did make his way to the front through all the rush. It was a fashion among the young to imitate the oratory of Surendranath Bannerjee and Bipin Pal. In his later life also, in some spirited moments, Benudhar Sarma would make a point following the fiery rhetoric of Surendranath Bannerjee. This is an indication of how deep was the impression they left on his young mind.

In 1917, Annie Besant published a booklet *To My Brothers And Sisters*. To quote Benudhar Sarma " There was a spark in each word of that speech of Besant"('Bangabashi Collegot', *Jayanti*, 11th year 1st issue). That inspiring speech was an added heat to Benudhar's patriotic fervour. Not only did the then government ban the booklet, the police ran search operations to confiscate its every available copy. Benudhar's mess at 3/13, Amherst Street did not escape this. While police began the search from one end, Benudhar's room-mate Harendra Narayan retrieved the copy from under the pillow of Benudhar, tore it into pieces and threw them in the commode. The police did not find anything objectionable and they being Assamese, did not do any harm; however a few Bengali boys were detained. This was how he felt the hot-wave of the Swadeshi and Home-rule Movement. And this fired the young Benudhar's spirit.

Some days later, the conference of Indian National Congress was held in Calcutta. Annie Besant was the President. There was an Assamese team of volunteers in the same. It attracted the attention of all around. Benudhar was one of them. Through all these activities, his mind leaned more towards the reconstruction of India's national identity than towards academic studies. Till 1920/21, Assam was not exactly a part of India's political mainstream. Though the religion and culture were closely linked, politically the province was away from the national scene. The vision of the young Assamese mind was more Assam-centric than nationalistic. It was only from about 1920 that an all-India feeling gradually germinated in their minds. The winds of change began to hit the young mind and college education took a back-seat.

The other political current which was already flowing through the minds of Assamese students in Calcutta, was, to be aware and vigilant about the dignity and interests of Assam. A sense of commitment and belonging for the cause of India's Independence and a craving for establishing a glorious entity of Assam—these two ideas shaped the political outlook of the Assamese young men in Calcutta. The team from Assam that went to Calcutta to be witnesses of the historic Montague-Chelmsford deliberations included Gangagobinda Phukan, Ghanashyam Baruah, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Chandradhar Baruah, Tarunram Phukan, Nabin Bordoloi, and Prasanna Kumar Baruah from Dibrugarh. It was due to their efforts that Assam ceased to be under a Chief Commissioner and became a full-fledged State under a Governor. The purpose of Montague-Chelmsford deputation was to discuss with the Indian leaders the proposal of minimal self-governance. Seven representative leaders were nominated from the Assam valley. The aforementioned were those who argued for the interests of Assam. The discussions were held in the third week of December, 1917. Even after that, towards the end of 1918, another team came under the presidentship of Lord Southborough and held sittings at important places, meeting representations in the context of administrative reforms of to be implemented in India. From Assam valley, the King of Gauripur Prabhat Chandra Baruah, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Ghanashyam Baruah, and Sayed Muhammad Sadullah were the representatives of the people that met the Southborough Committee in Calcutta. The Assamese students there got the opportunity to interact with these leaders on the issue of the rightful claims of Assam. The frequent visits and the company of leaders like Gangagobinda Phukan, Ghanashyam Baruah, Tarunram Phukan and others who were ever vigilant for the rights and claims of Assam, oriented and inspired the students to this important aspect of Assam's politics. Not only that. As Benu Sarma said "We accepted their mantra with all devotion"(*Jayanti* 11th year 1st issue).

Benu Sarma was supposed to sit for his B. A. examination. But right at that time the wave of the Non-Co-operation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi hit the city. Already the young minds were only too inflammable with the news of Jallianwallabag massacre, and when Mahatma Gandhi addressed the masses at a public meeting in Calcutta with his soulful words, they could take it no more. Benu Sarma's interests in study thinned considerably. He had deposited the fees for examinations but he did not sit for the same. In 1921 he returned home. He earnestly convinced himself with the message of Gandhiji: "go to villages."

This period in Calcutta gave two things to Benudhar's life. The ambience here was encouraging for literary persuits and the company of the learned equals was always inspiring, but that was not solely Calcutta's gift. The novel acquisition he made in Calcutta was the love for history he cultivated and a thirst to re-establish the almost forgotten glories of Assam in the social mainstream. No taste or treasure does surface over night in life. If traced, its roots can be linked to some distant moment in the past but there is a special significance of the moment of its assertion. The seeds of the love of history and the glories of Assam were there in Benudhar's mind but the exile in Calcutta excited it. The malicious comments of some superfluous people and the quest incubated in the Imperial Library oriented this very special element in his mind to a relentless growth. The other gem that he acquired during his student life in Calcutta was a powerful commitment for the independence of the country and a zeal towards a revolutionary struggle for the same. The two sensibilities can be unmistakably seen in his prolific literary career in later years. In his works one of these cannot be analysed in isolation from the other. Both these currents have nourished his literary field. And not nourishment only, the very hue of his literature is a result of the synthesis of these two rays.

Translated from Assamese by Amrit Jyoti Mahanta

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Kshitimohan Sen

Pranati Mukhopadhyaya

At Chamba

Chamba was a small native state on the Himalayas, laced with hills all around, towards the Eastern border of Kashmir at the North-Western boundary of India.[1] The legend goes that Chamba was founded in 920 A.D., at the instance of the princess Champavati, by the river Iravati. The popular folk belief in the village was that Chamba was given its name as it was the land of champak flowers. True, there were plenty of champak trees in the Chamba plateau. The popular name for Iravati is Ravi. In older times the banks of the river, miles after miles, were covered with dense forest. When Kshitimohan was there some of it was being cleared to bring the land under cultivation and the place was slowly being populated. It was lush green in the forests of the river valley and in the corn fields. Kshitimohan came here as a headmaster in 1907. The letter of his appointment here described him as headmaster. Professor Bhabatosh Datta mentions that this appointment was that of the Education Secretary. Probably this post used to be considered as that of a Secretary or that of a court scholar. The responsibilities given to him included teaching as his primary job, with the inspection of the *tols* and *chatuspathis* at Chamba and the recommendation of scholarship for the scholars attached to them coming next. Besides, there was a project then to build up an art museum at Chamba. Kshitimohan's third responsibility was to assist in the planning and execution of that project.[2]

The then king of Chamba was Bhuri Singh, of the same age as Kshitimohan. The two became good friends. At the request of

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(Excerpted from *Kshitimohan Sen o Ardhasatabdir Santiniketan* by Pranati Mukhopadhya, Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi, 1999) the king, Kshitimohan would discuss Sanskrit poetry with him for hours everyday. Even otherwise he would run into him several times a day. He had his residential quarters in a separate house, close to the school building; there were residential houses on one side, rows of hills and bushes on the other. Food used to be served from the royal palace and for domestic assistants and conveyance he used to be given everything at the royal expense.

After the day's work in school and office, he would go out with his students for a walk. On a big stone slab by the riverside they would take their seat and continue their session for the day. The passers-by, known or strangers, would slowly gather and take their seats on one or the other of many such slabs strewn around and would feel free to participate in the discussion. But they wouldn't have much time available here in the open. Dusk would soon descend and it would be too cold. All would get back home and the session would be over. A long-time after when he was writing his essay "Jugaguru Rammohan" Kshitimohan remembered these simple-unlettered hill people that he knew at Chamba. While making the point that we cannot see the greatness and nobility of Rammohan's personality, he writes in this essay:

> Long ago I lived for sometime in the Himalayas. The simple hill people there cannot count more than twenty. Once we were talking about the vastness and the distance of the world of stars. The point couldn't simply be put across. Those hill people, so simple, not understanding a bit of it though, looked in wondrous awe. And for us, although our power of comprehension isn't very great, we are nevertheless clever people; so, instead of being awestruck, we laugh it out in disbelief blurting 'Oh! Was it greatness really?' We do not have even the simplicity of the hill people to give in to wonder.[3]

The students loved their new teacher. Once there was a short vacation; Kshitimohan on some school business had to go to Amritsar. To reach Amritsar from Chamba, then one had to take a long journey across the hills and horses were the only means of conveyance. Though Kshitimohan would ride, his students eager for his company, would go on foot. Kshitimohan too would now walk and then would ride again. These young boys would never tire in keeping him company, nor would their enthusiasm dim.[4]

He loved to listen to *kathakata* (story-telling). While in Kashi and here too in Chamba, he went looking for story sessions held in. He loved mixing with people. As he would indulge in *adda* sessions every afternoon with his students, he would similarly be a regular visitor to the well-attended story sessions of the Chamba people. Such was his nature, wherever he would be, he would learn about the special features of the place, the different communities living there, their social structure and their customs and practices. He would learn about their artefacts, their art and architecture, their monasteries and temples, their books and manuscripts—he would get himself introduced to those people and listen to their music. This was his practice also at Chamba right from the beginning. He knew the lifestyle of the ordinary men there and their art and culture. It was cold there, and, after a day's work all would gather and sit together to listen to stories. Here, a good story–teller was held in high esteem; an expert in the art of *kathakata* would be highly revered. The stories he listened to and collected included stories of war, the narratives of the royal people and ghost stories, which he would recount later at Santiniketan. Some of these pieces were included in his writings. The story of king Rasalu was one such.[5]

Harikishore Tarkavagish of Kashi was an extraordinary scholar of Nyaya and was an expert veena player. Kshitimohan knew him. 'Such a combination of Nyaya and music is rare indeed.' Once, in a feat of renunciation, Tarkavagish went on a pilgrimage through many places. It was long ago that Kshitimohan had heard from him of the far-flung centres of pilgrimage in the Himalayas. The Haragouri centre and its presiding deity, the goddess Uchhista, about whom he learnt from Harikishore, had a great attraction for him, but he could never dream of that ever being realized in his life. It may be surmised that during his stay at Chamba, Kshitimohan went on a visit to the temple of the goddess Uchhista. The deity here was called Jalpa-Bhavani. The essay that gives an account of this travel also has a reference to the fact that then he happened to be in the Iravati valley at the Himalayas. There he met a certain European gentleman in a bungalow called 'Dunera'. He learnt from him that that ancient temple was in the shade of large deodar trees at some distance from the bank of Khazir lake by the river Iravati, but at a considerable height. The offerings to the goddess are eaten in the first night by the wild bears. The daily offerings contain honey of superb quality, maybe that is what tempts the animals. But they never attack any visitor to the temple or anyone else in its vicinity and because hunting is prohibited here they are also safe. The European gentleman was complaining about this prohibition. Sometime after he had learnt this Kshitimohan had the opportunity to visit the temple. Many saints used to assemble there; this was why he started visiting the place frequently in the hope of meeting them. There he learnt from an old saint the amazing story of another Uchhista goddess and her virgin devotee. This he narrates in the essay. But as he came back from that place soon after, he couldn't himself go there.[6]

The sacred place of Jwalamukhi is only thirteen miles away from Jwalamukhi Road station. Previously, to reach there one had to first come to Amritsar and then make a long journey in a *tonga* via Pathankot. Kshitimohan went there twice from Chamba and in both his visits he was amazed to find many aged Bengali women pilgrims on his way. Writing about this pilgrimage he says: 'Near the base of the Kangra province in the Himalayas is this famous sacred place of Jwalamukhi. On the ninth night of the moon in autumn and spring there is a very large fair organized here. In the temple a flame is worshipped as the embodiment of Shakti.' Incidentally, Kshitimohan also mentions that the Chintapurni and Vidyeswari temples of Kangra are also famous. Probably he went there. He also mentions the importance of another very ancient temple, which was destroyed in the earthquake of 1897.[7]

At Chamba, in the eastern part of Kashmir and at several other places, there are many temples of Nagdevi (goddess of snakes) and at some places this goddess is worshipped with great pomp and splendour. This essay also gives an account of very ancient temples of goddess Chandi as also of the temple of goddess Jalpa-Bhavani deep in the forest in the shade of thousand-year old deodar trees by the river Ravi. We have already mentioned that Kshitimohan would often visit that temple. His writings not only contain accounts of goddess as Shakti incarnate, but they also have ample accounts of ordinary mortal women.

Kshitimohan is full of praise for the women of Chamba; they are as beautiful as they are hardy, their simple, graceful ways and movements are sure to attract the notice of everybody. They are mostly visible in cornfields and farmhouses. It is the duty of a woman to look after the cows and to milk them. Kshitimohan observed that even after such hard work they carry forward the traditions of folk music and dance. Once on his journey he took shelter in Dunera bungalow and was struck by nature's beauty there, the tinkle of the flowing hill brook being music to his ears during the whole night. The next morning he found a maiden in her early teens going along with a heap of fire-wood on her head. That picture of beauty was stamped in his mind as though permanently. He writes: 'She appeared to be the maiden Bhavani. She was not just a hill girl with blunt features. Here was one with a very sharp nose and "the eyes of a young doe." She is perhaps from the land of Kuluteswar as described in Kadambari. What a graceful beauty!'[8]

In a Hindu kingdom like Chamba the women then used to move about freely. Kshitimohan writes: 'With the melting of snow the hill surface and the trees and the bushes are all on a sudden covered with patches of flowers. That is the season here of a spring festival of incomparable beauty. In early Baisakh one particular day of the festival is reserved for the women, they are all powerful that day—this is known as Madhav festival. On this occasion they can get on any man and can tease him any way they like—if you take the slightest exception you may have a heavy fine slapped on you. Even the king cannot waive it. The king even is so afraid that he keeps himself confined to his palace that day.'[9]

Kshitimohan also couldn't escape this teasing on the Madhav day. Spring is there and it's no longer snowing, the trees and plants wear the colour of new life. Traces of snowfall by the roadside are still there. 'When there was no more snow and it was all pleasant everywhere, I went out in the afternoon in that deodar forest around the temple of Jalpa Bhavani.' Till then he was totally unaware of what the women could do. He also didn't know that in the Bhavani temple that day the local women were all powerful and they would indulge in dance and music there. Seeing him out like a fool on such a difficult day a friend of his ignored his own risk and started following him. The friend was there for a long time and knew the local custom. But by the time he came out Kshitimohan had already been on the bridge on the river Ravi deep down the township of Chamba. The friend could reach him only when he had crossed the bridge and was on his way up the hill and about to enter the forest of the goddess Bhavani. When he knew about the practices from his friend they both turned back immediately, the visit to Jalpa Bhavani abandoned midway. Not the usual road, they took the difficult, winding hillyway and were coming down stealthily to escape notice. Now they suddenly found a group of young ladies standing in front of them. The friend said: 'Look, we are still within the bounds of the goddess, they may not tease us too much. But whatever they do, please do not object to that, for that will be even worse.' The women took them in their custody and pondered for a moment what to do with them and then picked up chunks of ice from the road and pushed them through their shoulders into the warm jackets of both of them. A feeling of terrible cold came down the spine—'The whole body twisted like a snake hurt on the head, we both took it with great strain. We raised not the slightest objection, and the girls, we do not know why, left us with a loud laughter. That saved the day.'[10]

He was surprised and a bit shaken then, but later on in his

Indian sojourn he had many other kinds of experiences. Only a small part of it finds expression in his writings. He knew at this time that at Chamba and at nearby places practices of the Vedic times, even older than the *Smritis* were still current. He further found that there the goddess was worshipped in accordance with *Brihannandikeswarpuran, Devipuran and Kalikapuran.* These direct experiences were included in his *Hindu Sanskritir Swarup,* but that was much later. He came to know through his researches that the Bengali king, Bijay Sen, belonging to the Ballal dynasty came here to conquer and settle down. He himself realized that in the local language currently used, a few stray words from East Bengal dialect and some of the social rituals still now betray traces of their origin.

He wrote an essay "Kashmire Tapaswini" (A Saint in Kashmir). That was in 1952. There were intense political activities then involving the Kashmir question. Kshitimohan felt: '…news about Kashmir and her politicians now would be in great currency. But does it have anything to do with the soul of Kashmir?' Even forty years before this essay was written he had a rare opportunity of his life to know the soul of Kashmir. He would go to Kashmir through the Bhadrawar-Kintwar road in the Iravati valley. He recalls the grand beauty that surrounded him on those journies in these terms. 'Many of my experiences are associated with my travels on that road.' At that time he would nearly aimlessly roam about the villages and market places of Kashmir. His own province was down there, the South-East of India and Kashmir was up on the other side, the hilly region in the North-Western part of the country. The climate, the nature, the flora and the fruits grown there and the crops of these two regions are known to be widely different, yet he would feel an unknown inner link between Bengal and Kashmir. A striking similarity would appear to be there in the nature of the peoples and in their life practices and the collective rituals. The locales are different, but it would still appear that the way the boats are built here and the boatmen and their music—all would seem to be like that of Bengal. He had some acquaintance with the *shastric* scholarship here and that also gave him a feeling that this land also was as rich in the cultivation of subtle treatment of logical niceties as in Bengal. He felt that like in Bengal the Saiva traditions and Tantric knowledge are held in high esteem here also. Both lands present a similarity in terms of the Rasapak sutras of Ayurveda and in the modes of astrological calculations.[11]

Now he noticed that here in Kashmir and in nearby places Katantra or Kalap grammar was in great circulation. In East Bengal grammar means Kalap and Kshitimohan in his *Chinmay Banga* notes how the Bengali mind spreads itself out in India and even abroad in various directions. In his description he recalls these grammars and their commentaries that he knew at Chamba and its neighbourhood. He came to know personally that even the Bengali commentaries of the Katantra grammar were esteemed in the Himalaya Garhwal regions. 'The veteran scholar Prabhakar Bore (1907) of village Brahmapur under Chamba was well-versed in the Bengali commentary of Katantra. Among the Lamas in some of the Buddhist monasteries in Western Tibet near Kashmir the Katantra rules are highly regarded.' It is true that Kshitimohan makes these observations on the authority of authentic texts and written evidences, but still one can feel a touch of his direct experience. On this basis he claims, 'Katantra was first popular in Kashmir even without its Durgasinha *Vritti*. Durgasinha *Vritti* was known here much later. That is why the scholars here had written themselves many a commentary on Katantra even before their acquaintance with the Durgasinha *Vritti*. Hence their orderings and arrangements are different.[12] Through his personal experience Kshitimohan had developed the idea that it was the geographical location of Chamba and its neighbourhood and the nearby places of Tibet that would explain why the centuries-old temples and monasteries here were still in their continued existence and why the different arts were being cultivated there in grand isolation uninterruptedly through ages and why the age old ancient wisdom was still a living tradition. It was a hilly terrain difficult to reach and was under snow most of the year. These natural factors had saved this region for hundreds of years from foreign invasions and had enabled it not to surrender before the aggressive expansionism of the Sikh and the Muslim.

Even though he found many similarities between Bengal and Kashmir, anything in the nature of the Vaishnav and the mendicant Baul tradition of Bengal, as also the predominance of love and devotion in the practice of folk religions first escaped his notice. He never thought that even here he would find a similar current of love and devotion in the folk mind of Kashmir. Around this time he came to know the poet Iqbal. Then he knew that even in respect of the traditions of movements based on love and devotion Kashmir resembles Bengal. He knew from Iqbal: 'Islam was preached in Kashmir by the Sufi saints. They had as many as sixteen centres in Kashmir. That is why Kashmir is such an example of love and devotion involving both the Hindus and the Muslims. There are many devoted persons in Kashmir like the Bauls of Bengal. Lalded was one of them.'[13]

With this knowledge Kshitimohan started researching on this woman saint. As a result he came to learn that this unusual woman had established the Baul tradition in Kashmir, though she had not the opportunity to know any saint of this tradition. Then while still in Kashmir this opportunity once came to him, but he couldn't make good use of it due to the inexperience of his young age. There when he used to freely roam about on foot he would always get hospitality of a very simple kind from the ordinary people. It had enough sincerity in it without any showing off. Once it happened thus:

> '1907. Moving along the magnificent village roads of Kashmir. One day a little girl came running on my way. Snow clouds gather. It will soon be snowing now. Afraid of a special kind of snowfall the village women posted the little child there. Nobody should venture forward in this bad weather. Snowfall ahead, no shelter there. Sure death without any shelter. This kind of hospitality was then very common there.'[14]

Many of the travellers had taken shelter in the village. Kshitimohan was also one of them. All the nearby households had such guests. The snowstorm came and they were held up for some days. The family that had hosted them was not rich, but could afford two square meals. Milk, ghee and butter were abundant and, therefore, *ghol* (battered milk) too, and there was plenty of honey, to be sure. In a house nearby he met an old woman saint—her clothes were torn to a thread, but her eyes deep and calm. She was well-known to the village families and was greatly revered. Days were passing happily with her audience regularly granted and he was just thinking of collecting some valuable sayings of the saints, listening to her. Then she suddenly disappeared under the cover of the night when the weather was a little better. No one knew about her and Kshitimohan wouldn't ever find her again. He regretted the loss of such an opportunity. The villagers also felt bad about it. From them he came to know that she was once a person belonging to a well-to-do family who took to the devotional path after the loss of her child. Hearing about the ways of her devotion he felt that her practices were somewhat like those of the Bauls. He listened to the sayings of Lalded from that woman saint. He didn't know her directly, but the indirect knowledge he had of her was enough to suggest that her life was inspired by those teachings. The night before she disappeared she was humming some of the *sahajiya* devotional lines of Lalla or Lalded. Kshitimohan quotes one of these in its original Kashmiri version:

Yiha yiha kara suya archun,
Yiha rasanhi uccarymr tiya manthar.[15]

Whatever I do is your worship, whatever I say is your prayer. While listening to these lines he could realize that in India there were *sahajiya* devotees like Lalded much earlier than even Kabir. It was sheer luck that he could experience that devotion in the life practices of that old woman saint. That he didn't know her more closely left a feeling of void in him. She left them all during the night lest some honor or a recognition be conferred on her or lest someone should stand in her way.

After this Kshitimohan researched in various places for the sayings of Lalded and then he came to know that European scholars too were out to find the factual background of this woman saint. Impressed with his urge his Kashmiri friends later on gave him a collection of Lalded's sayings, infact sixty of them.

What he wrote about Chamba in his essays seem to suggest that the fresh experiences he had gathered at that young age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight helped him keep his spirits high. Although this was true, but a life cut off from his dear land and his near ones was too painful and lonely. This finds its expression in a contemporary letter. He wrote this letter from Chamba via Dalhousie in Punjab, on 12 April 1908 to his wife Kiranbala, on the eve of the celebration of the New Year:

> Dearest,
> Let me first send you my heartiest congratulations and affection in this season of the New Year. How do I make my love and affection known to you? Whatever you feel in the innermost soul, know that to be the truth. Pray that newer happiness and sorrows may gradually lead you in the New Year to the feet of that Absolute one.

This letter mentions the birth of the young child Kankar and also that of the daughter Renuka. In her young days he used to call her Neri (the shaven-headed). He writes:

> Well, does Neri remember me? And will she recognize me? What do you feel about it? Does she ever ask for me?

The third child of Kshitimohan and Kiranbala, Kshemendramohan was born on 19 March 1314 B.S.i.e.,towards the beginning of 1908. He was born at Sonarang. His pet name was

Kankar, his grandma called him Suprasanna, later on Rabindranath changed it to Kshemendramohan. Towards the end of the letter we have quoted from, Kshitimohan writes to Kiranbala to come over to her father's workplace at Buxar: 'I am also eager to see you.' He was perhaps looking forward to meeting his wife and children in the near future, wanted to know from when he should write to her father's address. And here it seems that he unsuspectingly betrays a lurking feeling of loneliness:

> 'Sometimes I read, sometimes I come outside and enjoy nature's beauty, but I always feel your absence. I count my days—and hours—and weeks—look at the time-table and these are some of the ways I deceive myself. My heart aches, I know not when I'll meet you. You've your responsibilities. You've the children for you—you've people around to talk to—but I've none else but God, who gives me strength.[16]

It is in this letter that Kshitimohan further says that he has replied to a letter from Rabindranath Tagore. Not one, there was an exchange of several letters between him and Tagore about his joining the school in Santiniketan.

Translated from Bengali by Sourin Bhattacharya

Notes

1. Chamba was a native state in erstwhile Punjab. Here the king used to be honoured with eleven gun salutes. The kings here were almost independent rulers for many centuries. Even when under the Mughal and Sikh influence, the kings had never lost their independence. Chamba came under British rule in 1864. According to Kshitimohan, Chamba should have been as well-known to us as Selaidah-Patisar. The Tagores had their estate at Sadhanpur much below the hilly regions of Chamba. Maharshi Debendranath used to come and stay here. 'Maharshi was very fond of this place. Many of his writings were done here in the solitude. The writings of this period along with other papers were with Priyanath Shastri, an admirer of the Maharshi. Unfortunately much of it has been lost to pests.' Rabindranath came as a boy with his father to Dalhousie and stayed at the suburban Bakrota. With the description of those days as in *Jibansmriti* in mind, Kshitimohan writes that the vision of the Himalayas that Tagore had in his boyhood makes its appearance in his poetry even much later and the wide expanse of the *keluban* in which the poet used to move about lonely happens to be a major item of the wealth of the Chamba forestry. After thirty-five years of Tagore's Dalhousie visit Kshitimohan was there for his job.—Unpublished Autobiography, Kshemendramohan Sen Collection.

Presently Chamba is a district of Himachal Pradesh, the health resort of Dalhousie is in this district.

2. 'The museum was founded, but much later, in 1908. By that time I had left my job there and joined Santiniketan.A museum like this with a collection of paintings of the the hill style or the Kangra paintings or the kerchief art is not to be found anywhere. This art collection named after the king of Chamba, Bhuri Singh, is now one of the established collections of the world.— Unpublished Autobiography, Kshemendramohan Sen Collection.
3. "Jugaguru Rammohan", *Rammohan o Bharatiya Madhyajuger Sadhana, Kshitimohan Sen.*
4. Unpublished Autobiography, Kshemendramohan Sen Collection.
5. "Panchanadbir Rasalur Kahini", Kshitimohan Sen, *Desh,* Autumn Number.
6. "Sarbarupamayir Puja", Kshitimohan Sen. *Desh,* Autumn Number, 1359 B.S. "Tarkavagish lived in the village Madhanagar in Rajsahi. He wrote an excellent work *Nyayapadartha Tattva* and was an expert of the instrument veena." *Ibid.*
7. "Bharater Devipith", Kshitimohan Sen. *Anandabazar Patrika,*Autumn Number 1344, BS.
8. "Sarbarupamayir Puja", Kshitimohan Sen,
9. "Bharater Devipith", Kshitimohan Sen,
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Chinmaya Banga,* Kshitimohan Sen.
12. *Ibid.*
13. "Kashmire Tapaswini", Kshitimohan Sen,
    Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938)—famous Urdu poet. Born in Sialkot in Punjab. His ancestors were once Kashmiri Brahmins. Iqbal was a lawyer and also a scholar of the Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages. But he was foremost as a poet. He was knighted in 1922.
14. "Kashmire Tapaswini".
15. *Ibid.*
16. Kshitimohan's letter to Kiranbala, 12 April 1908, Amita Sen Collection. Kshitimohan and Kiranbala's second child was a daughter, called Feni, who died at the age of two and a half.

Mahadev Desai

Narayan Desai

"Mahadev, Arise Mahadev!"

15th August 1942. Aga Khan's Palace near Poona.

Gandhiji dictates a telegram to Dr. Sushila Nayyar: "Mahadev has died a *yogi's* and patriot's death. No sorrow allowed."

The telegram was addressed to Chimanlal Shah, Manager, Sevagram Ashram. Durga, Mahadev's wife and Narayan, Mahadev's son were staying in that Ashram. This telegram about his demise in jail was delivered to Mahadev's near and dear ones by the British Government, after full twenty-two days with a short note, saying, "We are sorry about the delay due to some error in delivery of this letter because of some mistake."

Mahadev's dead body was lying in front of Gandhiji when he dictated this telegram. Flowers, gathered by Miraben from the Aga Khan Palace garden, adorned the body which Gandhiji had bathed with shaking hands. He had dried the body with his own towel which he used immediately for himself. He then gave the towel to Sushila and said, "Preserve this towel. It is to be given to Babla (Narayan)."

Gandhiji told Sushila after bathing the dead body, "Do not give Mahadev's clothes to anyone else for washing. You wash them yourself. Later on they are to be handed over to Babla." In the side pocket of Mahadev's shirt was found an edition of *Bhagvadgita* and in the front pocket a fountain pen. Both were symbolic. *Gita* was the root of inspiration for the noble sacrifice in which Mahadev had offered his life only minutes before. And the flames of that sacrifice had arisen from that pen which was ever present on Mahadev's chest. These two articles portrayed the significance of Mahadev's life. The *Gita* signified the depth of his character, the pen its magnitude.

Later Sushila asked Gandhiji for clarification about his immediate reaction to Mahadev's death.

"Bapu, you did feel distressed when Mahadevbhai died didn't you?"

"How do you deduce this?"

"You were looking at his face and calling, as if distressed, 'Mahadev, arise Mahadev;' weren't you?"

"No there was no distress."

"So?"

"In my calling there was faith."

"Faith? How so?"

"I felt that if Mahadev opened his eyes and looked at me, I would tell him to get up. He had never disobeyed me in his life. I was confident that had he heard those words, he would have defied even death and got up."

There was every reason for Gandhiji to have that confidence. Mahadev had spent exactly half of his life with him. In that period did he ever disobey him? Did Pandit Totaramji, an old inmate of the Ashram, relate an incident which occurred after about six months of Mahadev joining Gandhiji ? It happened thus. Both Mahadev and Pandit Totaramji were sleeping in a small room of a house on Mirzapur Road in Ahmedabad. Suddenly Panditji woke up on hearing a loud sound. He saw Mahadev standing on the adjacent cot. When Panditji asked him, "What happened Mahadevbhai? Why have you suddenly got up?" Mahadev, before lying down once again, demurred in his reply, "I don't know. Maybe I was dreaming. In my dream I felt that Bapu was calling me and so probably I stood up." Since the moment of his joining Gandhiji, till his last breath, Mahadev never questioned Gandhiji's judgement.

The body that was peacefully lying, like that of a meditating yogi, was beautiful enough to charm even Kamadeva. Only a few minutes before his death, sitting in front of a huge mirror in Sarojini Naidu's room, Mahadev had borrowed a pair of small scissors from Miraben and had clipped his nails and clipped his moustache. Once Gandhiji had compared Mahadev to a rose. On hearing that simile Sarojini had honoured him with the epithet *Gule-Gujarat* (Flower of Gujarat). That very morning Sarojini had teased Mahadev, comparing him to a bridegroom. It seemed as if in that fine morning Mahadev's favourite song of Kabir, 'Adorn yourself, 0 clever one! For you have to go to Your Beloved,' had become a reality.

A piece of sandalwood found in Sushila's purse, was used for applying paste on the forehead of the charming person who always added joy to life and welcomed death like a yogi.

That soft sound of the chanting of the *Gita* mingled with the fragrance of the incense-stick lit by Miraben.

Gandhiji, who, some minutes before had appeared slightly perturbed, slightly agonised, sat up and joined the *Gita* recital.

Bhajans from *Ashram Bhajanavali* were sung after the *Gita*, some of which had been recited by Mahadev himself during their six days incarceration in the Aga Khan Palace.

How and where the last rites were to be performed was the question that was uppermost in the minds of Sushila, Mira, Sarojini Kasturba and above all Gandhiji himself.

The jail authorities were in a dilemma about the cremation. They could not accede to Gandhiji's request that Vallabhbhai and Kher be allowed to come and discuss the matter with him.

In the meanwhile a truck arrived bringing a Brahmin.

"Brahmin?" Gandhiji pricked up his ears, "Why a Brahmin?"

"To perform any worship, if so desired," said an officer, with his head bent low.

"All necessary worship over here has been done." Gandhiji replied a bit sternly in a slightly raised voice.

Bhandari came to Gandhiji, pushing Sarojini forward. "What is the news?" asked Gandhiji.

"I have arranged everything," Bhandari stuttered.

"What arrangements have you made? Can I hand over the dead body to friends?" Bhandari looked agitatedly at Sarojini. Sarojini clarified. "The Government does not want to give the dead body to anyone. Bhandari would himself cremate it on the ghat."

"Can one of our people go with the body?"

"I am afraid not."

Gandhiji kept quiet. His mind was in turmoil. He remembered that the dead body of Swami Shraddhanandji's assassin was handed over to his relatives after he had been hung. That body was taken out in a procession which was allowed by the government then, even when there was every likelihood of a communal riot breaking out. Today the same government was refusing to hand over the dead body of a person like Mahadev, to his immediate near and dear ones.

The dilemma Gandhiji faced was whether to swallow this bitter pill or fight out the issue with the government. How could he, the upholder of Truth and Non-violence, allow the body of his son to become a political issue.

Turning to Bhandari he asked, "Can I cremate the body here myself? I had hoped that some day Mahadev would cremate me, now it is I who will be cremating him."

Bhandari was able to contact the authorities both at Bombay and Delhi and was given the permission to cremate the body as desired by Gandhiji. While preparations for the cremation were going on, Gandhiji chose to wrap Mahadev's body in the coarse sheets available in the Jail—as befitting the death of a prisoner.

Gandhiji's message to freedom-fighters — Satyagrahis — was to view the jail as a palace, and now for him the palace was transformed into a prison. All around the building a barricade had been erected with wooden planks. On one side, the palace retained its old colour, while the other side was not coloured at all. A barbed wire fence had been erected all around and seventy-six armed constables were constantly on guard. The Government was harbouring a seventy-four year old, lean bodied but 'extremely dangerous' prisoner.

Death freed Mahadev from this bondage. Outside the fence a spot was cleared for the cremation. The fencing had to be cut to enable the cortege to pass through. The bier was made from the branches of neighbouring trees. Gandhiji led the mourners with the flame in the earthen pot, while six persons carried the bier. The others followed in total silence.

A chair was placed for Kasturba, at a distance from the funeral pyre on which the body was placed. Ba was shaken but gave her blessings with folded hands and tears in her eyes, "Mahadev, be happy, wherever you go. You have served Bapu constantly and given happiness to all. May you also be happy," was her constant refrain.

When the arrangements for lighting the pyre had been completed, Bapu went towards the pyre and looked at Mahadev's face. Then Gandhiji himself lit the fire. He who had been the father all his life now performed the duties of a son.

When the fire had cooled, Gandhiji personally collected the ashes, put a *tilak* on his forehead with it and said, "These ashes have to be preserved for Durga." Once again he remembered Babla. Turning to one of the officials he said, "If none of us gets out alive from here, please show this place to Mahadev's son."

From the time of Gandhiji's arrest on the 9th August 1942, all those who had been put into jail with him, found Mahadev to be under great strain. Gandhiji had repeatedly indicated that he would be going on a fast unto death when he was arrested. He would not even take water during this fast. Mahadev did not like this idea at all and had even opposed it. But the discussions had not ended, when they were arrested. The mere thought that Bapu would, fast unto death was like a Democles's Sword in Mahadev's mind.

Pyarelal, the co-secretary with Mahadev, believed that Mahadev death held off Gandhiji's fast. "When everyone's appeal failed t stop Gandhiji from undertaking, the fast unto death, Mahade succeeded. This is the only incident of its kind in Gandhiji's enti life according to my knowledge."

In his own way Gandhiji expressed the same thought, "Mahadev sacrifice is not a small thing. He fully obeyed the call, 'Do or Di This sacrifice is bound to hasten India's day of liberation."

For months after the funeral, the only subject of conversatio amongst the prisoners was Mahadev—a Yogi and a patriot.

Sushila recalled that the ever joyful Mahadev had become ver solemn after their arrival at the Aga Khan Palace. Miraben said th Bapu's decision regarding his fast had been agitating Mahadev mind.

Sarojini said, "If anyone has died for someone else, it is Mahade Like Jesus Christ, he died so that others may live. What great service can a man render than give his own life for others?"

In the Aga Khan Palace Miraben put up a rectangular structu at the site of the *samadhi*. On it she made a large ॐ with shell At the four corners she made the new-moon and star—emblem c Muslims and made a Cross right in the middle.

Kasturba christened this place 'Mahadev Mandir' and Gandhi made it a rule to visit the *samadhi* every morning and evening wit flowers and to recite the 12th Chapter of the Gita. He said, "Mahadev life was an unending poem of devotion. To think of him slokas onl from the Bhaktiyoga can help."

The government sought to withhold the news of Mahadev death. They had tried to conceal the fact that Gandhiji and his part were being detained at the Aga Khan Palace. Three days prior t Mahadev's death, the doctor in the jail had prescribed some medicine for Kasturba and had asked the authorities to get them from Poona The Doctor had written Kasturba's name on the prescription. Mahade saw it and laughed. He drew Gandhiji's attention to the fact tha if that prescription was taken to the Poona market, Kasturba's illnes and her whereabouts would immediately be known.

A *satyagrahi* does not overcome his opponent through duplicity but wins him over through love. And so Gandhiji told Mahadev to draw the attention of the authorities before the prescriptions were sent out. The Superintendent, Mr. Kateli, heaved a sigh of relief an never tired of thanking Mahadev again and again for having saved him from committing a blunder.

* * * * *

Mahadev gave his first piece of ethical advice to Babla when he saw him gazing with wide eyes at the orchard. "The oranges are very nice, aren't they? We shall daily get as many as we want. This orchard has been named in the memory of Magankaka. And Kakaji (Jamnalalji) has donated it to the nation. So now it does not even belong to him. All these oranges now belong to the institution. We can see them but not pluck them. We will buy daily as many as we want." This was indeed a salutary advice but as it had been given by papa in his language it was not that unpalatable. Therefore not once did Babla cast a greedy glance at those oranges.

Actually the bliss of Mahadev's life of a householder started at Maganwadi, thirty-two years after his marriage. In Bombay and Ahmedabad, Mahadev did have occasional satisfaction, but this was almost the first opportunity of joy when curious Babla's questions came almost non-stop. For the first time he had the pleasure of worrying about the marriage of a younger sister, Bachu, twenty-six years his junior as he was in jail when Shanta got married. He must have been worried a lot about Durga's health, but this was probably the first time when he could actually look after. Mahadev was experiencing for the first time the value of married life—and the happy consciousness of responsibility. We may say that Durgaben's empty abode was filled with joy.

Once whilst cleaning Sindi village, Miraben felt that she would like to leave the town and stay in a real village, and Gandhiji encouraged her to do so. For some time she stayed in Vadodara village, but later she selected Segaon. In a very short time the deity Mohandas followed the devotee Mira and decided to stay in Segaon. There was no post-office in the village, so it was decided that Mahadev would stay at Maganwadi, Wardha; would go to Segaon daily with the morning post and return in the evening with the out-going post, handling the rest of the work there during the day. Bapu was going to settle down in the village, so Mahadev asked Durgaben to come and stay at Wardha after vacating Sabarmati.

Wardha's Navabharat Vidyalaya was called Marwari Vidyalaya at that time. Jamnalalji used to have a say in its management as he did in many other institutions of Wardha. E. W. Aryanayakam, who had recently come from Shantiniketan, had taken over as the Acting Principal. The administration was the same as before Aryanayakam's appointment as the Principal. Mahadev intended to admit Babla in that school for his education. Narayan rejected the Vidyalaya after the first day's experience. All these years Narayan had been brought up in the Ashram. He had spent the last year as a student of the fifth standard of Vinay Mandir of Gujarat

Vidyapith. There he was known as mischievous but clever student. Once or twice, complaints about him spread as far as Maganwadi from the Vidyapith. But here he had to complain about the Vidyalaya. Instead of complaining, he gave his final verdict: "Papa, I am not going to study in such a school," and to support his decision he used the ultimate weapon of a child-weeping! Then he slowly described the things he objected to in the Vidyalaya.

Mahadev neither rebuked, nor scolded Narayan; nor did he admonish him for deciding without giving thought. He merely said, "The decision will be yours, but won't you take Bapuji's advice once?"

Narayan was prepared for it. Quickly he wiped off the tears and scribbled off a letter to Bapu, in which he described in detail all the vices of the Marwari Vidyalaya he had seen in one day. The last sentence of the letter was decisive. It was to the effect that he had written this letter for seeking advice, but had definitely decided that he was not going to study in such a Vidyalaya.

Next morning Mahadev himself took Narayan's letter along with the other post and brought Bapu's reply the same evening "Bravo!"

Durgaben was worried. Some time previously some older boys from the Ashram had left the Ashram and gone out to take 'proper education.' If that didn't happen with Babla would he not regret it? Mahadev was busy for the whole day; from where would he find time to teach Babla? What would he do in future if he did not study? Those were the points which worried her. Next day Mahadev received a letter from Gandhiji saying that now it was their responsibility (Gandiji's and Mahadev's) to educate Babla. That he should join in their work, and that would be his education.

On the other hand, Aryanayakam found Babla's decision childish. He wrote to Gandhiji saying that it would be a mistake to discontinue Babla's education. "He is avoiding school because he is still a child. But then he would be nowhere. The shortcomings of Vidyalaya would be gradually dealt with since he had taken up its reins."

Gandhiji called both Aryanayakam and Narayan to Segaon. The case was presented in the presence of Gandhiji during his walk for three days. Narayan told Gandhiji the very first day, "Nayakamji is a very learned man. My arguments would not be effective before his. But my decision is final." Gandhiji whispered to Narayan, "Why do you worry? I am your pleader."

* * * * *

Sometimes Mahadev tried to rest during the day by closing the room. At that time he would tell Narayan, "Baba, I am going to lie down

Do not wake me up even if an emperor comes. Even if Yama (God of Death) arrived, tell him to wait for some time."

Babla would ask mischievously, "And Kaka, what should I do, if Bapu comes?"

Mahadev did not have an answer to that. He looked at Babla and said "You rogue! In every way you trap me!"

But Babla had the answer to that question. He knew that Mahadev would be awake the minute Bapu came. There would be no need to wake him up.

We would relate here an episode which took place during the Second World War. Gandhiji had put before the nation his plan of non-violent opposition to an attack from the foreign powers. A part of that plan was for the non-violent soldiers to face the attacking armies to become 'cannon-fodder' by fearlessly standing in front of the cannons. For the success of any Gandhiji's plans, it was imperative to put it into action through his close associates. He explained this whole plan to the inmates of Sevagram Ashram and asked as to who was ready to go to the War Front and face the cannon.

That night Babla's bed was, in between Mahadev's and Durgaben's in the courtyard of their hut. Mahadev and Durga were talking, believing Babla to be asleep. Babla was listening with interest to the conversation with closed eyes, because he happened to be the subject.

Mahadev: Did you hear what Bapu said today?

Durga: Of course, weren't we sitting together?

Mahadev: What have you thought about it?

Durga: What is there to think about? We do what Bapu says.

Mahadev: Are you ready to die?

Durga: If you have to stand before a cannon, you have got to die, haven't you? But what has been thought about Babla? Let us do like this. Babla is now grown up. I looked after him all these years. Now he would need education, which only you could give. So you stay here. I will enlist in Bapu's army.

Mahadev: How can I stay out ever when you enrole? Can I stay back if Bapu's army is going to become cannon-fodder?

Both had a point in their talk. Both kept quiet for some minutes. At last they decided that if Bapu asked for such an army they both would give their names. 'Babla has grown up and is now sensible enough. He is in God's hand.

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Let us consider the relationship between Mahadev and Gandhiji. Perhaps it was very much more than that of a son and father. Mahadev was not Gandhiji's son, but he belonged to him and ultimately merged in him. To Mahadev, he remained 'very Revered Bapu' till the end as he was in the beginning. Only once during his own sickness had Mahadev addressed him in a flippant way when he asked, "Why don't you write a love letter to me?" Otherwise the devotee had maintained his distance along with his keen desire to become one with him. His desire was to put his head on Bapu's feet or in his lap at the most. Bapu may have written, "I wish to come and embrace Mahadev." But Mahadev had never dared to say that.

It looks they were totally different. For the one Sarojinidevi could easily give the simile of 'Micky Mouse' while she used to address the other as *'Gule Gujarat'* (Flower of Gujarat). Both had the power of attraction. But Bapu's was that of a different strain from that of Mahadev. Bapu's power of attraction came from the nectar of his soul and his skill acquired from his vast experience. Mahadev's power of attraction was from his 'God-given' elegance and his charm from his love-drenched speech.

Bapu was erudite, or you might say he was one who was always searching for pearls in the form of truth. Mahadev was a devotee. He was always swimming in Bapu's abundant love. Bapu's action as the desireless action arising out of a soul wedded to truth. Mahadev's action was like a clear cascade of water flowing out of a heart full of devotion. Bapu was an ocean of experience and hence the chief author of aphorisms. Mahadev was an annotator, thirsting for experience. Bapu was an original thinker and a teacher using original language. Mahadev was an expounder, interpreting Bapu's original thoughts to the people in simple or scientific language. Bapu was so much interested in Truth that without Truth he found life bitter. Mahadev found Truth through the sweetness of life.

Bapu's entire personality was severe like the afternoon sun of the summer months. Mahadev's personality was gentle like the full moon. Bapu had shaped Mahadev's entire personality. But did Mahadev have any effect on Bapu?

If we think about this question with reference to other great contemporary personalities, we might understand it better. Suppose Mahadev had been working with Rabindranath, Sri Aurobindo or Tilak? But he did not go to any of them—he went to Gandhiji. Mahadev's contribution in making Gandhiji what he was, was quite substantial.

There was a definite effectiveness in Gandhiji's writings after meeting Mahadev. The language of *Hind Swaraj* and *Experiments with*

Truth is the language Gandhiji used for his two basic books, and the change would be evident when we compare these two. Christian Bartlof from Gandhi Centram, Berlin, had told this author in an interview that on studying Gandhiji's writings, it has been clearly evident that after being in Mahadev's contact his language had become softer and more precise. The people in the West find it easier to understand Gandhian thought because of Mahadev's writings.

Mahadev also had an effect on Gandhiji's emotional life. And that is why he said when Mahadev was there, that "Mahadev enhanced the prestige of the Ashram," and after his demise he said, "All of six people cannot fill the lacuna created by him."

Mahadev did the excellent job of supporting Bapu's thoughts on one hand with the help of the ancient works like Veda and Upanishads, and on the other hand, with the help of old and new literature of the world.

Quite often Mahadev also put before Bapu the thoughts of those opposing him by further clarifying them. Rajaji had specifically noted this point in his tribute. Bapu also got Mahadev's help in explaining his opponents' thoughts to him. Mahadev had become friendly with the Personal Secretary to the Viceroy. And Gandhiji said in the Gowalia Tank meeting of August 8, 1942, that the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow had fallen in love with Mahadev. Virawala, the Diwan of Rajkot, was more comfortable when he talked with Mahadev than when he did with Gandhiji. With him the work progressed only when Bapu's truth and Mahadev's charm combined.

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"Bezwada (Vijaywada) comes on the way from Madras to Wardha. River Krishna flowing between two huge mountains takes on an awe-inspiring form. Today there is glitter of electric lights on its dam, in those days there was an unmixed natural beauty. Jamnalalji had visited Raman Maharshi's Ashram just then. He had praised the purity and peace of the Ashram's atmosphere to Bapu. Papa's heart would be touched when any saintly individual was mentioned. He started asking questions about Raman Maharshi with devotion and enthusiasm. Jamnalalji, Bapu and Papa got a subject of common interest. Bapu asked during the conversation: "Mahadev, why don't you visit the Ashram?" Papa became very happy. Jamnalalji encouraged him, "Yes, certainly, it is definitely worth visiting at least once and to go to Tiruvannamalai it would be convenient if you change the train at Bezwada. When you have already come this far do go this time. When will you find time again?"

Papa told me to pack up his bedding. The train had reached river Krishna's bridge.

Jamnalalji was telling Bapu, "The peace that I found in Ramanashram I could not find even in your Ashram."

Bapu told Papa after some time, "Do not make haste in returning from there. If you also experience the peace that Jamnalalji did, gladly stay on for some more days. Do not worry about work."

Bapu said this very naturally. But to remain away from Bapu for a longer time was a thought intolerable to Papa. He turned to me and said, "Babla, undo the bedding."

I was stunned. Bapu also looked with astonishment. He asked, "Why Mahadev, why are you telling Babla to undo the bedding?"

"I have given up the idea of going."

"Why?"

"One master is enough for me."

Kanaiyalal Munshi has rightly said that Mahadev's attitude towards Gandhiji was like that in the *Gita*, "Abandon all duties and come to Me, the only Refuge."

Translated from Gujarati by Narayan Desai

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C.V. Raman Pillai

P.K. Parmeswaran Nair

Chapter 4

Staying Away

From a letter sent by one of CV's classmates from Mylapore on February 23, 1881 it is clear that CV passed BA Examination with a second class and ranked seventh in the Presidency and second in Thiruvananthapuram College. The question now was, what next? By that time, many of CV's classmates had already got employment. But CV didn't care much about it. What dominated his mind was the desire to pursue independent ways. But what about earning his livelihood? If one passes BL, one can enter the legal profession; that means a decent job where one can also engage in political and community activities, was his initial line of thought. But, from where does one get financial support? He was able to complete even BA by depending on others. He didn't wish to squeeze others any further. Besides, there was another handicap—his ill health. Stomach ailments and the resultant chest pain were troubling him.

The disruptions in daily routine caused by continuous reading and constant travel had aggravated his illness. So, even before taking up any employment it was necessary that he should get urgent medical attention. He tried various treatments in Thiruvananthapuram. All were in vain. Finally, he went to Patthanamthitta and stayed for some days with his elder brother Narayana Pillai, who was Tehsildar there. CV felt some temporary relief under the treatment of Poyyani Kurian Vaidyan. Meanwhile, he also stayed with his other brother Sankara Pillai when he was employed in Paravur, Kollam. The stay at Paravur and Nedungolam resulted in the general improvement in his health. And this solitary life helped his reading. One-and-a-half years went by in such travels and camping. Even though Kesavan Thampi tried to get him a job, it was of no avail, for his influence had waned and, moreover, there was dissatisfaction in high places about the job-seeker. More than employment, CV preferred a life immersed in public affairs. His extraordinary talent for writing articles and criticism in English drew him towards journalism. In 1882 he started a weekly newspaper *Kerala Patriot*. The series of articles he wrote on the ill-effects of 'Viruthi' system, a current issue of importance, attracted the attention of Divan Rama Iyengar. CV didn't have any hesitation in ruthlessly criticizing government policies.

Meanwhile, his brothers created a difficulty for him. They forced CV to get married. As far as CV was concerned, he was a person who held high ideals about marriage. In the imaginative and idealist mind of a youth like him, the picture of 'love' was inscribed by the novels and Indian stories he read, and it was a very fascinating and romantic one. He had found a 'queen of his heart' in a house in Perunthanni in Thiruvananthapuram whom he adored in his mind. But that sweet yearning did not find fulfillment. In the story "Premarishtam"[1] that he began to write towards his last days, which is about his own married life, he had indirectly described that virgin beauty, his idol of love....

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He was a young man in such a state of mind where the ideals of marriage were receding from lofty images into disappointment; and the elders were forcing him to marry a girl, a Thankachi[2], whom he had never known. At first, CV refused. But in the end, he agreed, succumbing to the pressure of the sense of respect and obedience he maintained towards his elder brothers. The marriage was solemnized. At that time CV was mostly staying with his brothers at Paravur. He took his wife there. She was one who had grown up in an atmosphere of total freedom. The high ideals of CV and her shallow, high society manners didn't match. One day, when CV returned home after a journey, she was not to be found at home. Later he came to know that she had gone to Thiruvananthapuram. CV never enquired about her. When his brother asked him to bring her back, an infuriated CV showed his most terrifying visage. The brother acquiesced. After that, CV never saw the Thankachi again. Thus another small sub-narrative in that life came to an end.

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[1] In this quotation from "Premarishtam" (The Potion of Love), the name Vidyujjihwan denotes CV himself, and the house is the famous Nair taravad 'Koyikkalashiyam' in Karthikapally Taluk. The head of that household then was Kochukrishna Pillai who was an important and powerful person. Though the story of the journey is fictional, it is worth remembering that CV, when he was employed in the High Court, used to travel extensively in Northern and Central Travancore with the travelling judges (mostly with Judge Kunhiraman) .

[2] Thankachi – Daughter of men from Travancore royal family in their alliance with Nair women. The male counterpart of Thankachi is 'Thampi.'

Maybe due to such bruises to his heart and other such disappointments, CV disappeared from Thiruvananthapuram for some time. Shortly before that, he is also said to have exhibited some signs of insanity. The past events had caused a bit of an estrangement from his brothers. So, there was no reason to believe that he was bound to their houses this time when he set out on a journey.

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CV came back to Thiruvananthapuram after two-three months. He didn't go straight to his or Thampi's house. He saw Padmanabhan Thampi outside. He had brought some curios and delicacies for Padmanabhan Thampi and Raman Thampi. When they took these things home, Kesavan Thampi came to know of CV's arrival. He didn't get angry. "Ask Ramu to come here," were the only caring words that came out of him. When CV came to know about this through Padmanabhan Thampi, he had the courage to go home. Next day morning he went to the house of Kesavan Thampi. No words of censure came out of his mouth. "I have never seen Father getting angry about him, for he always loved him so much," this is what Raman Thampi stated to the author after describing the incident about the return of CV.

That journey is a very important event. Whatever be the reason, and though bereft of any immediate benefits, later events would prove that this journey had a profound influence on CV's mind. For, the person who travelled was not a dullard but an educated youth who was talented and imaginative. That he travelled to places like Hyderabad and Mysore, lived in many places and interacted with the people there, and visited many historic sites related to Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan—all these had far-reaching results. The customs of the Muslims, the ways of life in the Deccan, in the villages, towns, temples, mosques, lodges and monasteries, several such things that CV witnessed ignited his imagination and added to his experience. Hyderabad attracted him very much. He even seriously contemplated the option of not returning home. Mrs. A R Pillai (CV's eldest daughter) reminisces about a photograph that CV had brought along with him and kept for a long time in his house: CV was seated in the middle of a group of men who were majestic in appearance—one can guess that they were Muslim notables. It was difficult to recognize him with his imposing headgear, dress and footwear with ends turned up. He had shaved off that majestic moustache of his. Going by his attire, he looked like a Muslim. Later, CV himself used to tell stories about it, as his son Sekharan Pillai remembers. The notables who were with him in the photograph had high regard for him, especially for his music. They even asked him to adopt Islam, and marry and settle there. CV's mind then was also more or less open to such proposals. Seeing signs of sympathy, they encouraged him further. But (owing to the good fortune of Malayalam language and literature) their efforts at having him converted didn't bear fruit; nor did his exile extend further. A Seth from Thiruvananthapuram chanced to meet the half-crazy youth wandering in the streets of Hyderabad; he persuaded him to return and brought him back to his native place. CV used to say later that "it was a miraculous escape from an otherwise disastrous perversion."

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Chapter 8

Marriage

Even before 1887, CV's status in Thiruvananthapuram City was considerable. Even though his job was that of a clerk and his salary meagre, CV's position and the attitude of the people towards him were far above all that. There is no doubt that it was his public initiatives, purity of character, intellectual accomplishments and efficiency that placed him at such a high position even at that young age. He was the very image of the ideal man and the idol of the youth.

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The adulation and fame he thus got became a cause for the issue of marriage to resurface. The gaze of many parents who were also son-in-law seekers, fell upon this extraordinary youth. But CV was not keen on marriage and 'kept aloof from romantic urges' due to that one early disappointment of his — in not being able to win the woman of his dreams — and also because of the mental agony caused by the marriage that his brothers forced upon him. He thought that another marriage would only add to his miseries. Most of the people who came with proposals returned disappointed. Even then that Silent Force that is supposed to be working incessantly, was duly performing its duty.

We had described in an earlier chapter the journey he made to northern Travancore in search of his 'first beloved' and his dejected return after witnessing the sad plight of her being the 'lady-love of a frog-voiced old monkey'. CV had also described another incident that he created in his imagination while he was returning from a northern trip. He described this experience at an aristocrat's house by the side of a river in central Travancore where he got down from the boat for breakfast, thus:

> Gathering the name of the house with the help of the ferryman, our traveller got down there, happy at the thought of getting a good breakfast. He entered the boathouse that attracted his attention; like the bungalow, it was also clean with high roof and doors at the gate-tower. Even at those early hours, carpenters were at work there. The sight of the able-bodied servants silently striding towards the river-ferry, to the house and in other directions, further intensified Vidyujjihwan's joy. As he entered the boathouse noting in his mind how fortunate the local community was in having such an exalted household among them, he found to his great joy that the dishes for Panicker's breakfast were also already laid down! The scent of the *puzhukku* being garnished with mustard was wafting across and he decided that he only needed a coconut leaf midrib and a little *umikkari*[3] before quenching his hunger. A grand man aged about forty-seven entered the boathouse through the door at the southern side. It was evident from the studded ear-rings that swung on his ear-lobes that he was the head of the household....After keenly inspecting the work of the carpenters for a few minutes and then looking nowhere in particular, the aristocrat uttered the first words of greetings to Vidyujjihwan: "Where are you from?" The word 'you' in a singularly condescending fashion, dulled Vidyujjihwan's hunger and stoked the fires of his anger. One's manful personality ignored, an infuriated Vidyujjihwan, without waiting for a reply or even pleased to have a look at that grand house, walked towards the ferry and boarded the boat. From the master of the house that had gained as much fame as the royalty of Vanchinad did for its generosity, not a word came out to prevent the guest from leaving.

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[3] Umikkari & coconut leaf midrib—:burnt chaff of paddy that is used to clean one's teeth, and the indigenous tongue-cleaner, respectively.

The rest of the story can be summarized as follows: a humiliated Vidyujjihwan boarded the boat and continued his journey. When the boat had moved a few yards, 'a nymph with ear-length hair' came running and started a ruckus shouting "Bring the boat this side; Father asks you to come and have some kanji"...Vidyujjihwan didn't have the strength to disregard the pretty girl's orders. Turning the boat back, he got down, and accompanied by the vivacious girl, went inside to have kanji. Later, he also had his lunch there. By that time that girl had got very close to Vidyujjihwan....

A few years after these events, Narasimham Pillai, who was CV's classmate and later, colleague in the office, started troubling him with a new marriage proposal. Narasimham Pillai was a friend who was very close to CV's heart. He was one of those jovial friends who frequented CV's place to enjoy his amazing narrations and singing. So, CV took his proposal seriously. Even then, to say it in the language of "Premarishtam", "My dear Narasimhanna, (The vocative case of Narasimham Annan. Annan means 'Elder Brother', a respectful form of addressing an elder) I don't have the strength even to bear myself. Put one more burden on my back, and I will have to carry it even through the Kasi pilgrimage. People do not leave me to myself. Don't you now join them,please." He was actually trying to evade the issue with such excuses. Narasimham Pillai's reply was funny. He said, "You two are made for each other like one eyebrow for another. When one moves, the other too moves. Such a match can only be described as Divine Will."

Here is another event that happened afterwards in CV's own words:

> On the Arat[4] day of the next Thulam[5] Festival, the group of Nair youth, all BA degree holders, gathered together to go to Sankhumughom to offer prayers to Devi. Neither the greatness of the Devi, nor the royal splendour or the bustle of the crowd, the decorations on the houses, the crescents that lighted up the windows of the houses... nothing caught their eager gaze. The group flowed westwards, pushing through the crowds, ignoring the police orders to keep off the white sand, debating heatedly the happenings in other countries, boasting that victory is theirs till the end of the world. To the swearing and abuse of the crowd, their ears remained deaf. And their eyes were blind to the surprised looks and derogatory gestures of the elderly.

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[4] The day of the festival when the idol is ritually immersed in water.

[5] Month in the Malayalam Era (October-November)

> The leader of this group that was moving along snatching each others' upper garments, pushing and shoving, rubbing shoulders with each other, and jumping as if to charge above their companion's shoulders, was Vidyujjihwan. He, by chance or by Narasimhannan's 'Divine Will', was blessed with his glance up a window that opened on to the platform on the southern side of the royal path. And the birth of a new Vidyujjihwan happened at that very moment.

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But Vidyujjihwan (CV) didn't leave his enquiry there. Before long he came to know that it was the same 'little sprout' that he met in that wealthy house in central Travancore years before that had grown into a youthful creeper that he saw now. And the proposal that Narasimham Pillai Annan had brought was also the same. There was yet another strange match: she was the elder sister of his first love, the beauty he had thought of marrying! Wondering at the strange ways of fate, without much further thought, and with the consent of his brothers, he married Keezheveettil Bhagirathi Amma on 3rd of the month Vrischika[6] in 1062 M.E (1887 A.D).

Chapter 11

Malayalee Memorial

CV's participation in the Malayalee Memorial Struggle that happened along with the publication of *Marthanda Varma* has not become as known as it should be. The names most famously associated with it are those of K P Sankara Menon (Advocate, Madras High Court) and G P Pillai (Editor, *Madras Standard*). They both had a significant role to play in it. It was Sankara Menon who submitted the Memorial before the Maharaja. G P Pillai also was included among those who were selected to submit the Memorandum before the Divan later. G P Pillai played an effective role in the number of meetings organized in several parts of Travancore as part of the campaign explaining the principles involved in the submission of the Memorial. His speeches swayed the people. It was as a result of such campaign that so many people from various castes and religions joined it. But there were some individuals who stayed behind the curtains and led all these initiatives wholeheartedly.

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[6] November-December

Prominent among them were C Krinsha Pillai and C V Raman Pillai. As they were government officials, their names have not been publicized anywhere. But it is doubtful if the idea of the Memorial would have taken shape if they were not there.

It was in 1889 when CV was staying in Madras for his Law Examinations that he brought the matter of this struggle to the attention of Sankara Menon and G P Pillai. By then, Sankara Menon had already agreed to take the lead in submitting the Memorial before the Maharaja once the tasks like the signature campaign were over. With the return of CV, the campaign proper started. Enraged and stubborn at the repressive policies of Rama Rao, C Krishna Pillai immersed himself relentlessly in the signature campaign. His trips to the northern ranges in connection with official duties came handy in this regard. CV used all his influence in the capital city. In Southern Travancore personalities like Sivan Pillai, and in Northern Travancore, Kavalam Neelakantan Pillai and M R Neelakantan Pillai were roped in to lead the movement.

Before elaborating upon the submission of the Memorial, let me explain what it was all about. It was a problem of historical importance. The nepotism of the Maharashtrian Brahmin Divans in the official appointments in Travancore was a matter of grievance for a long time. Though this took the shape of the Memorial only during the time of Divan Rama Rao, even before that the colonial government was aware of it. In 1845, during the time of Reddy Rao, Madras Government had given orders to dismiss some of his relatives from Travancore service.[7] The Divans who came after the time of Reddy Rao, the ones like Venkita Rao, Subba Rao, Krishna Rao, Sheshayya Sastri and Rama Iyengar, and even the most famous among the lot, Sir T Madhava Rao himself, were targets of such charges. And Rama Rao's reign saw the pinnacle of this deep-rooted malady. Upon examining the list of top officials during his time, it was found that one single class dominated it. Maybe it was not quite justifiable that some people ventured to lay all the responsibility for this upon his shoulders forgetting the actions of his predecessors. But that dominance was an actual fact. While there were a number of foreigners (not all of them Maharashtra Brahmins) drawing salaries in the order of Rs. 2000, 1200, 1000, 800, 700, 600 and 500 the Memorial was able to point out easily that there was not a single Malayalee who drew a salary above Rs.500. Some of the close relatives of Rama Rao were appointed in posts such as that of Divan Peshkar and District Judge. On the whole, the protestors had a resolution that could be clearly proved through statistics and logical arguments.

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7. 1. State Manual by T K Velu Pillai, Vol II Page 698

CV himself mostly did the preparation of the Memorial. After that, it was given to Norton, a leading advocate from Madras, for examination and legal amendments. By the end of December 1890, Sankara Menon and GP arrived in Thiruvananthapuram and launched a massive campaign. Through their relentless efforts, CKP and CV had brought to the fold the various important personalities from all over the country. Through that short term campaign the number of signatories to the Memorial had increased to 10037. On January 1, 1891, Sankara Menon submitted the Memorial before the King. In the letter that accompanied it, the aggrieved had described themselves as highly dignified individuals—scholars and leaders from among the different groups that formed His Highness' subjects. In the reply to Sankara Menon's letter it was instructed that the Memorial be submitted to the Divan by a deputation of six persons. Accordingly, the six elected representatives — K P Padmanabha Menon, G P Pillai, Nidhiri (advocate), M K Padmanabha Pillai, Sivan Pillai and Kavalam Neelakantan Pillai met the Divan on July 2nd and submitted the memorandum. The negative policies (of the rulers) that affected the major groups among the subjects of Travancore and what the Memorialists wanted to submit before the King were pointed out in it — that people were not given their due share in governance of the country and in the case of the natives, they were prevented — almost deliberately, from entering government service. As it was high time that this injustice perpetuated from the past is repaired, their next plea sought the King's kindness to prevent such negative acts as submitted in the Memorandum from happening in the future. In the last paragraph of the Memorandum they prayed that the subjects of His Highness be given the opportunity to serve their country.

Not only government service, the Memorial had also specifically mentioned the iniquitous dealings of the government in educational matters. Apart from the prayer to remove the ban on the entry of lower castes into schools, the memorandum also contained a paragraph about the Ezhava community, which was as follows:

> Sadder than all these is the fact that there is not a single Ezhava in the Travancore government service who earns five rupees or more per month. Not that there are no intelligent and educated members among them. In Malabar, many members of this caste occupy the highest posts that Indians can occupy in the Civil Service.

After the memorandum was submitted, all the major newspapers in India strongly supported it. Newspapers like *Madras M* *Madras Times, The Statesman,* and *Morning Post* of Calcutta, *Punj* *Patriot*, and *The Englishman* wrote editorials in favour. G P's *Madr* *Standard* continuously carried articles and editorial comments on th issue. On the whole, Malayalee Memorial turned out to be a b event.

But before long, a counter-Memorial was also submitted. Clearl it was only a strategic response. Intended to dilute the power o the first Memorial, it only resulted in the opposite. It was state that the aim of the Memorial was "to remove an unnecessarily allege taint upon the State." The leaders behind it were advocates of th High Court like E Rama Iyer and K G Sesha Iyer. The Divan calle the representatives from both the sides, heard them, and promise to take necessary remedial measures. Though the opponents trie to establish that Malayalee Memorial had no basis, the consequence of the Memorial did not fail to appear soon. His Highness the Mahara gave the representatives of the people an opportunity to appear befo him, and gave an assurance that their grievances will be taken car of. Soon, Rama Rao retired from his post and Sankara Subbaya replaced him. Being a native, the latter won the respect and lov of people. And people like Thanu Pillai who were blessed with highe education and efficiency received the encouragement that was du to them.

Malayalee Memorial is a very important event in the politica history of Travancore. It is the first link in the series of popula struggles through established means. CV sacrificed a lot for it formation and successful culmination. The collection of signatures was a very arduous task. The funds allotted to meet the expenses of those entrusted with that work were very limited. Afraid of earning the State's ill will, many persons withdrew from the movement, and the donations they promised were never realised. When the funds were not enough to meet the needs, CV had to spend from his own pocket. It was donations from rich people like Kavalam Neelakanda Pillai that sustained the earlier activities. At one stage, there was not enough money to meet the expenses for the travel and campaign by KP Sankara Menon and G P Pillai in various places in Travancore CV sold his wife's necklaces to raise Rs.700 to meet such expenses – a fact known to many old worthies of Trivandrum. Another difficulty arose when Mani Katthanar withdrew from the Memorial due to the strange policies of the authorities. It would have ended up in ignominy. But CV used his influences in Northern Travancore to include Advocate Nidhiri in the place of Kathanar to save the day All these are events that happened behind the curtains. Even though in the history of movements and struggles it is common for such secrets to be relegated to the oblivion, it cannot be forgotten that what really gave life to movements were silent acts of sacrifice like these rather than the well-known ones.

Even though there was an ethical shift in the recruitment policy of the government because of the Memorial, it continued its unrelenting attitude towards some of its officials who took part in it. C Krishna Pillai's rights an individual were denied. For a long time, CV was not given promotions of any kind. The criticisms raised by CV through *The Malayalee* newspaper scared the government. Following the publication of *Marthanda Varma,* when the fame, command and influence of CV rose, the very name of CV was a cause of fear to Rama Rao's government. At that time a law was passed banning government officials from running newspaper establishments. As a result, CV was unable to participate directly in the management of *The Malayalee.* It affected the circulation of the newspaper. Gradually, its publication had to be stopped. For sometime after that, CV busied himself with articles about the reformation of the Nair community.

Most of his political writings were sent to newspapers in Madras. He continued to be the local political correspondent of *Madras Standard.* The major topic of discussion of the day was the formulation of a Marriage Law for the Nair community. The absence of an established marriage practice among the Nairs was a matter of complaint for a long time. The educated among the community were trying for a long time to find a solution to this anomaly. Due to the special attention given to it by CV and CKP, Malayalee Sabha and *The Malayalee* had campaigned for this from the beginning. As a result, the general public was very well conscious of the need for a solution. But law-making was not such an easy task. As the marriage rules of the Nair community were related to those of other communities, it was not possible to enact a law without taking them also into consideration. Even then, it seemed that the unanimous outcry of the community did move the sympathetic feelings of the government.

By the year 1896, the government gave permission to Thanu Pillai, the then Chief Secretary, to present the Marriage Bill. The progressives among the community saw this as a good opportunity. The very fact that the Bill was given permission for presentation was a matter of surprise. They celebrated the fact that Thanu Pillai himself got this consent as a result of their good deeds in the past. CV ably assisted Thanu Pillai in discharging his duties. In the daily gatherings at home, Thanu Pillai brought into discussion the various portions of the Marriage Bill he was intending to present before the legislature.

The opinions of CV commanded respect in these discussions. Before long, the bill was ready for presentation. In the year 1072 (Malayalam Era), the Bill was presented before the legislature. The speech delivered by Thanu Pillai on the occasion stand testimony not only to his immense scholarship in community matters and laws, but also to his oratorical skills and community pride. This Bill had significant difference from the Malabar Marriage Bill presented years ago by (later, Sir) Sankaran Nair, the then advocate of the Madras High Court. Sankaran Nair conceived the Bill on the basis that matrilineal marriages (sambandams) were not valid marriages, and that marriages have to be newly introduced. Thanu Pillai's views were entirely different from this. According to him, the sambandams were valid marriages and they only need to be given legal validity through the Bill. When Sankaran Nair's Bill was published, Thanu Pillai is reported to have stated that its basis was flawed.

The Bill was entrusted to the Select Committee. And its advancement came to a stop there. Powerful oppositional forces were at work. The leaders of the Brahmin and Kshatriya communities, with the extraordinary powers they wielded then, destroyed the bill. After that, it has not seen the light of day. The efforts at bringing about a Nair Marriage Bill failed for the time being.

Even then, the community leaders did not retire from their efforts. Much later on, though, they did get another opportunity to wage an even stronger struggle—something that will have to be discussed later.

Translated from Malayalam by C.S. Venkiteswaran

Dr. Ketkar

D.N. Gokhale

The Beginning of The Project of an Encyclopedia

When ripe circumstances combine with endeavours of men of action, great works are done. Fortunately this happened in the case of *Maharashtriya Dnyankosha* (Encyclopedia). Before Ketkar projected *Maharashtriya Dnyankosha* the people of Maharashtra had been already in dire need of the systematic organization and compilation of available knowledge. Till then, in the Marathi language; born and developed around the beginning of the tenth century, diverse kinds of knowledge had been accumulated. Knowledge was derived on a large scale from foreign languages such as English, French, German etc. This knowledge was beneficial to our people and was available on a large scale. Works from Sanskrit and other Indian languages too were waiting to be translated into Marathi. It was necessary to make use of it as early as possible to make progress in our life. So it was felt that this knowledge should be examined and formulated systematically. Only an encyclopedia could make this possible. Now the scholars in Maharashtra clearly saw the way to bring out an encyclopedia. Contact with western people taught the natives educated in English schools what an encyclopedia meant and how it helped one to earn knowledge easily and quickly. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* was running into many editions. Its magnificent eleventh edition was published in 1911. It impressed the intellectual class tremendously. Scholars yearned to have an encyclopedia in Marathi language. Some of the sister-languages in India had already much advanced in the field of encyclopedia. They were the source of inspiration to the alert scholars in Maharashtra. In languages like Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Gujarati, Urdu etc. encyclopedias had already been produced or were on the way to be brought out. It was no wonder that Maharashtra was inspired by them. During that period, there were some attempts at writing encyclopedias. Under the British rule Janardan Hari Athalye, Dr. Sambaare and others tried to bring out encyclopedias but unfortunately they did not succeed. Vishnu Govind Vijapurkar and some other scholars in their speeches in a literary meet in Pune in 1906, made an appeal for an encyclopedia. It became clear that the enlightened Maharashtra was eager to welcome the project of an encyclopedia. In all the fields the period seemed to be ripe. In 1915-1916, Ketkar, both a scholar and a man of action, took initiative in preparing *Maharashtriya Dnyankosh*. He was successful as was expected.

Though the circumstances were ripe, the project was not at all easy. Ketkar knew the compilers would be required to go through not only hundreds of Marathi books but also thousands of books in other languages. They would have to evaluate the knowledge contained in them and decide what was of worth. Most of the knowledge was not written down in books but was made use of in practical life. It would have to be collected after proper investigation. If one found lacunae in knowledge, one would have to reconsider or reconstruct it. A compiler would be required to formulate and systematically organize whatever knowledge he had collected. It was expected of an encyclopedia that it should help the readers to survey the knowledge in the past and thereby acquire the insight to benefit themselves from the presently available knowledge. It was imperative that through the encyclopedia the man with insight should go beyond the compilation and arrangement and shed light on each and every aspect of society to guide its members towards future. One could not be satisfied with this intellectual mission alone. One would have to set up a huge organization. One would have to make the scholars contribute to the encyclopedia. One would have to see that they remained well-coordinated, one had to make arrangements for their salaries. One would require a huge machinery for printing as well as for publicity. For this lakhs of rupees would have to be procured. A man of extraordinary scholarship alone would not be able to cope with such a herculean task. It was imperative that an encyclopedist should be a man of insight, who would be able to guide society. Moreover, he should possess the qualities of an organizer par excellence. The project of an encyclopedia had been challenging Maharashtra since the very beginning of the British rule. In that century none accepted this challenge and succeeded. But Ketkar confidently accepted the challenge only to win.

Ketkar discussed this project of the encyclopedia with his friends Dr. Munje, Dr. Cholkar, Madhavrao Padhye and others in Nagpur in August 1915. Some predicted that the huge project would surely fail. Others as it was a good plan, one should have a try at it. Most of them dismissed the project as 'funny, extremely ambitious and hence ridiculous'. When a plan was published in structured form in 1917, one writer feared that Ketkar would not be able to cope with that difficult work. He opined that Ketkar did not possess the scholarship and ability which the editors of *Vishvakosh* (Bengali) and *Dnyanachakra* (Gujarati) possessed. The common man wondered how Ketkar would be able to complete such a great project as that of the encyclopedia, as he was not given even an ordinary lecturership by any University. As Ketkar was just thirty, many doubted whether the young scholar as head of the project would treat reputed scholars of mature years properly. Some were anxiously asking themselves how a roaming, unemployed young person could raise lakhs of rupees. Those who had experienced his whims and rude outspokenness, were fully convinced that he was totally unfit for the work of the encyclopedia. Lokamanya Tilak said this about encyclopedia in 1915: 'The work is very difficult, almost impossible to be done.' When the work of the encyclopedia started in about 1918, he said, 'I guess this work will take at least twenty years.' Rajwade, the great historian, predicted, 'One's whole life will be required to complete this work.' From all the quarters, the well-informed as well as the ill-informed, the well-wishers as well as the ill-wishers were expressing discouraging doubts. Against all odds, insufficient means and adverse circumstances, Ketkar vigourously started his work and gained a victory over all obstacles. He was young, he was out of a job. But with invincible self-confidence, profound scholarship, a seer's consideration for social well-being and untiring industriousness he wiped out obstacles as though they were cobwebs. In less than fifteen years he achieved it in the best possible way, the goal, which according to many influential persons, was impossible to achieve. His work placed him among the galaxy of the great architects of Maharashtra forever.

He talked about his plan of the encyclopedia to some of his friends in Nagpur in August 1915. Some months after he went to Advocate Narayan Khanderao Phadke, his relative, at Umaravati to attend the ceremony of investing his second son with the sacred thread, there Ketkar won the active support of Phadke. From Umaravati, he went to attend the conference of the Congress held in Mumbai. Privately publicizing his project of the encyclopedia there he won many people's sympathy. He went from Mumbai to Pune in the month of January, 1916. He tried to find out how interested the professors in Ferguson College and leading persons like Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar, Lokmanya Tilak were, and how many of them were in favour of his project. Ketkar's bitter criticism had already angered the teaching staff of Ferguson College. But Prof. Vasudeo-rao Patwardhan's behaviour towards Ketkar was sportsmanlike. Prof. Dharmanand Kosambi reminded Ketkar of the arguments about the Buddha published in *Kesari*, a weekly in Marathi. He avoided promising him his writings. When Ketkar requested him to write for his encyclopedia, he said, 'You think I am not suited for discussion. Still you request me to write for you.' Ketkar calmly replied, 'I gave up arguing with you as you gave up the sense of propriety.' Dhramanand thereupon asked him, 'If I am devoid of the sense of propriety, why do you ask for my writing?' What Ketkar said in retort was poignant and extra-ordinarily lucid. 'It's true you lack the sense of decency. I am requesting you to write on the literature in Pali. I shall find out another writer to write an article on the concept of propriety.' Dharmananda obviously did not appreciate the reply. He began showering allegations upon Ketkar. 'You hate the Saraswat Caste.' Ketkar was fed up with arguments. He put an end to their talk by saying, 'Let us after a few days fix a day for our quarrel.'

Dharmanand's allegation that Ketkar hated the Saraswat caste had some history behind it. Ketkar did not bear any hatred towards Saraswat people. On the other hand, he was their friend who was only now and then angry with them. In his young days Ketkar was a radical patriot. He was not on good terms with Bhandarkar, Chandavarkar and others who were liberal patriots. Ketkar was angry with them for various reasons. As they belonged to the Saraswat community, Ketkar began to hate their being Saraswats. Somewhere Ketkar wrote, 'It was well-known that Chandavarkar used to flatter the British rulers. His tendency was reflected in the Saraswat community. Most of the Saraswats held the view that the rule of the Peshwas was bad, and that British rule was very good....Among the Saraswats there was not a single person who intensely loved Maharashtra. The Saraswats would scoff at the organizations of patriots'. On the other hand, he said somewhere else. 'It is true that I hate most of the Saraswats. I hated them not because they belonged to the Saraswat community, but because I found their behaviour objectionable. Moreover, I say that if any Kokanasth Brahmin had behaved like Dr. Bhandarkar and Chandavarkar, my hatred towards him would have been greater.' Though Ketkar bore hatred towards some leading Saraswats, he did not hate the entire Saraswat community. Many knew about his view that Kokanasth parents should marry their sons and daughters not to the daughters and sons of Deshasth parents but instead, to Saraswats or Prabhus. He had more friends among the Saraswats and Prabhus, than among the Kokanasths.

It was not his habit to hide his mind and views. So he had unreservedly expressed his ill-will against some people of the Saraswat community. Therefore a rumour spread that he hated the Saraswats. Ketkar had published a series of articles on casteism. Some references in them offended a few Saraswats. I have seen many Saraswats who curse casteism, and the Kokanasth and Deshastha Brahmins, as they do not allow the Saraswats to sit together for meals. These very same Saraswats feel insulted if Prabhus dine with them and so leave the place immediately....Shenavis too are Brahmins. As long as they are not recognized as Brahmins and Prabhus's do not accept water from them, casteism will not disappear under their leadership.' Here, Ketkar pointed out that like other castes, the Saraswats too were caste-ridden and that their place in society was dubious. Ketkar's statements based on facts must have been an affront to the Saraswats. So these statements too must have helped in creating the rumour that Ketkar was a Saraswat-hater. This explains why Dharmanand Kosambi had accused Ketkar of his hatred towards the Saraswats.

When Ketkar turned from Kosambi to Bhandarkar for his cooperation, the same experience was repeated. Ketkar's opinion about Dr. Bhandarkar as well as the Saraswats must have already reached Dr. Bhandarkar. Somebody must have given him a distorted information about Ketkar's writings. He had been already fully prejudiced against Ketkar. As a result, both of them in the very beginning of the conversation attacked each other. Dr. Bhandarkar asked Ketkar, 'Do you consider the Shenvis as Brahmins or non-Brahmins'. Ketkar in his article in *Kesari* had not denied Brahminism to the Shenavis. On the contrary, he had called them Brahmins. So, Ketkar replied that the Shenavis were Brahmins. As the conversation progressed, Dr. Bhandarkar's mind was somewhat freed from prejudices. In the beginning, he was not ready to cooperate. But after some time he promised co-operation. He said he was ready to go through some articles.

Ketkar used to argue forcefully. However for the sake of his work, he would forget differences and request people who held opposite views, to cooperate with him. He requested Kosambi and Bhandarkar to cooperate with him in the project of the encyclopedia. That was the first instance of his policy of soliciting help. He was to meet such obstacles of casteism later on in his journey to the sacred field of knowledge through the work on the encyclopedia. In the meetings with Kosambi and Bhandarkar, he tasted the first obstacle which was to be followed by many.

When Ketkar saw Tilak, the latter expressed the first view that the work of encyclopedia was next to impossible. When Ketkar said that he was determined to accomplish the work, Tilak promised him cooperation of all kinds. He said, 'I myself shall write some articles. As far as I can, I shall give you financial help. Our *Kesari* will publicize your work. I shall recommend your project to those who come to see me.' Besides the promise of co-operation, he also advised him. While producing an encyclopedia, you must be very strict. You will have to scrutinise all the articles. You many even have to hurt the feelings of great persons though. Ketkar said, 'I shall not scrutinise the articles sent by persons like Tilak, Rajwade and Bhandarkar, as they are great authorities on their subjects. I shall print them as they are.' Tilak again warned him, 'Still you will have to examine all the articles. You may not examine Bhandarkar's articles. As far as I am concerned, do not give me the freedom to write in my own way. Don't give even Rajwade this freedom. If you edit our articles, I shall consider that you have done your duty.' Ketkar thought that Tilak's counsel was valuable. Encouraged by Tilak's assurance of cooperation, Ketkar left Pune, happy and contented.

After returning from Pune, he rented some rooms of Shri Date's house at the corner of Walker Road, Nagpur on 26 January 1916. There he founded the office of the encyclopedia. He chose Nagpur for his work, instead of Pune, the seat of learning. He did so for certain reasons. His articles "Criticism on Self-sacrifice" and "Criticism on the Buddha and Casteism" had branded him a Radical Party member. If he had started his work in Pune, it would have been reckoned as a party-activity and the work would have suffered. In eastern Maharashtra, political differences were not strong. Ketkar thought it was safe and convenient to start his work in Nagpur and thus avoid political differences. In Pune, Tilak was the only person for whom it was difficult either to exclude, or to include. Ketkar knew that if he excluded Tilak, his work would not be influential. He feared that if he included Tilak, the members of the Liberal Party would harass him. To avoid taking any risk, Ketkar left Pune for Nagpur. Moreover, as Berar-Central province, was his motherland, he had a special affinity for Nagpur. People of Vidarbha and even Ketkar himself, did not think it right that the organizations of Pune should raise money from Vidarbha and Nagpur to establish institutions in Pune. People of Nagpur and Vidarbha desired that such a monumental work should be done in the land where they were born and educated and not only the people of Pune, but the whole country should speak highly of them. It was destined that Ketkar should express his plan of the encyclopedia in Nagpur and be supported by his relatives, friends and well-wishers. As a result of all these factors, Ketkar preferred Nagpur to Pune as the centre of his activities. But fate thought otherwise. However much he was proud of his region, he had to move to pune after some time for the convenience of his work. He was to accomplish a great work in Pune.

People were greatly amazed to see an unemployed young person had decided to perform a herculean task. Very soon they were shocked again. Ketkar decided to found a limited company to bring out an encyclopedia, a sacred work in the field of knowledge. When he was in America he was familiar with *Loose Leaf Encyclopedia* and *International Encyclopedia.* These encyclopedias were produced by commercial organizations like Nelson Company, Dod Mead and Company etc. When he was in America he knew that *Encyclopedia Britannica,* a British encyclopedia, was being published by a British Company. Ketkar was implementing American ideas in India, throughout his life.

The idea of founding a commercial company to produce an encyclopedia was one such. Till then it had been our custom to keep knowledge apart from commercial and practical activities. Many literary projects had been completed under the patronage of Princely states and rich individuals. No one dared imagine that a common middle-class man would put his hand in his pocket for a work that would impart knowledge. When Ketkar decided to found a commercial company to produce an encyclopedia, everyone thought that his decision was strange and surprising. Ketkar announced his decision to found a commercial company in the very first meeting held in the first week of August, 1915. Later on, he confirmed his decision. In the first meeting it was proposed that the trust be created for an encyclopedia. As he had a keen, practical sense, he laid down the condition that those who were willing to work as trustees should contribute two thousand rupees each. As no one was ready to part with such a huge amount, the idea fizzled out. He implemented the plan with such skill that the machinery accomplished the successful completion of this monumental project. Taking this as a model, many people later on founded limited companies for literary projects.

Ketkar wanted to raise a capital of 50000 rupees, by selling 500 shares of 100 rupees each. Following this plan, he himself purchased twenty-five shares. Mahadeo Krishna Padhye, the editor of *Udyam*, a magazine on industry, sponsored Ketkar's project by promising to buy fifteen shares. When Ketkar came to Pune from Amaravati, N.K. Phadke agreed to purchase fifteen shares. Thus fifty-five shares were purchased. The dream of the project seemed to be soon realized. When Ketkar came from Pune to Nagpur, he made many persons sign 'The Memorandum of a Company' and 'The

Articles of Association' on 25 April 1916. Among the signatories were Ketkar himself, two sponsors (Padhye and Phadke), Dr. N.B. Kher, Dr. Cholkar, Gopalrao Oagle, the editor of *Maharashtra*, Dr. Munjay and others. The company was registered on 8th July and the Certificate of Registration was issued on 12th July. The purchase of 150 shares was necessary in order to get the permission to start the company. More than 150, in fact 250 shares, had been purchased. The government gave the permission on 4 March 1917. Under the Chairmanship of Raobahadur Thakur, the work was inaugurated with enthusiasm on 31st March the day of Gudhipadva, the first day of the Hindu Year. What had been conceived in August 1915 now began to be realized after the untiring efforts of one-and-a-half year.

Before the company was registered, the British government had some doubts about the encyclopedia. After touring in Andhra and Utkal, Ketkar came to Nagpur. He gave lectures on the budgets of Berar and the Central Province. In his speech in the University of Nagpur, he vehemently upheld the necessity for the development of Indian languages. These speeches made the government to suspect that he was a radical patriot. Standen, the commissioner of Berar, had a good opinion about Ketkar in the beginning. The government of Central Province was inclined to give him employment. But his speech on Nagpur University cost Ketkar the government's favourable opinion of him. The government concluded that Ketkar was a secret political activist. For some days, they employed secret police to spy on him. Ketkar adopted a humorous attitude towards the detective. Once in the Bhusaval Police Station, detective was replaced by a new one. While handing over charge, the outgoing officer pointed out the wrong person to be watched. So Ketkar, on his own, pointed out his mistake to the new one. He convinced the officer that the man he was to spy on was he himself. In order to ease the policeman's duty and to be free from nuisance, Ketkar would ask the detective on duty to buy a ticket for him too wherever he went. As the government doubted Ketkar's intention, the company of his encyclopedia was not registered quickly easily or smoothly. Ketkar knew that the Registrar of Companies had been in correspondence with other departments. When Hume, the director, asked Ketkar, 'Have you decided that the company should not be connected with the government or Europeans?' Ketkar replied in the negative and added, 'We have no objection to your being our partner.' Sir Benjamin Robertson, the Chief Commissioner, feared that the company would become the means of expressing extremely radical political views. He asked Ketkar, 'Will you include politics in your encyclopedia? I have some doubts about your company's intentions as your company includes men like Munje and Oagle who hold extreme opinions in politics.' Ketkar replied, 'An encyclopedia must include politics. But this politics will not be based on any political parties. Our role will be detachment, neutrality.' Sir Robertson liked the term 'neutrality.' 'If neutrality is not absent from your encyclopedia, I won't buy it's copies for our schools,' he made his policy clear. Ketkar assured him, 'For reasons of scholarship alone, neutrality will be maintained.'

After this meeting the company was registered. In the years that followed, the government did not intentionally give trouble to the encyclopedia company.

Though Ketkar was busy raising capital and registering the company, his mind was still engaged in academic activities like editing. Though the company was permitted to function in March 1917, Ketkar had already started editing articles he had received. Ketkar gathered together many graduates to volunteer for the project. They were made to summarize many books. The inauguration of the project was celebrated. During the ceremony, the works done on the volunteers were arranged in alphabetical order. When the ceremony was over, these volunteers were given the honorarium at the rates already fixed.

The work of summarizing books had already begun. It was necessary to write the constitution of the encyclopedia to define its areas of work, layout of the book, the range of the subjects. If the work—which was to continue for twelve to fifteen years, to be accomplished by more than fifty scholars, producing ten to fifteen hundred pages of literature, had not been systematically preplanned, it would have led to confusion and chaos. So Ketkar laid out a plan before the directors in the meeting held on 31 March 1917. The same plan was published in the newspapers for the information of the public. In the prospectus of 25 May 1916 one plan had already been partly published. Learning by experience, Ketkar revised it and submitted a new, more detailed plan. According to this plan they decided to produce *Maharashtriya Dnyankosha* from the point of view of a man of Maharashtra. It was decided that they would select and arrange knowledge bearing in mind the all-pervading progress of Maharashtra. In America he had seen the competition between *International Encyclopedia*, an American encyclopedia and *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In this competition the company that brought out *International Encyclopedia* was accusing *Encyclopedia Britannica* of being for the British people and from view point of the British people. It accused *Britannica* of having given information full of prejudices about America and that whatever information it gave was incomplete. *Britannica* had given a place even for the ordinary people of Britain but it had ignored many great Americans the company asserted. *Britannica* does not fulfill the needs of America. As it is written with a prejudice against America, it is not fit to be placed in the hands of young Americans.' Reading these allegations stated by the company that brought out International Encyclopedia. Ketkar realized that the nature of an encyclopedia should be such, as to meet the needs of the society for which it is produced, though it is an accumulation of all the branches of knowledge. So he decided to bring out *Maharashtriya Dnyankosha* taking into consideration the needs of Maharashtra. Hence the *Dnyankosha* did not become *Britannica's* copy or its imitation published in an Indian language. It got its own identity and became important in its own way. In the original plan, there was a definite policy regarding new researches and compilation of existing knowledge and that the *Dnyankosha* should not use new research. They decided that they should compile the knowledge that was available. Scrutinize it, note down significant summaries and arrange them in alphabetical order. But the merely available knowledge would not satisfy Ketkar who was ever-thirsty for more knowledge. Though his plan followed the custom of all other encyclopedists—that they should keep away from research—later on he procured a lot of hitherto unavailable knowledge and used in it hundreds of pages. It became more important than the compilation. Moreover, it became the unique feature of the *Dnyanakosha*. There was a definite plan regarding classification and publication. They decided to analyze many important books carefully and steadily, to collect different kinds of information and to let the subjects await classification later on. It was planned to bring out all the volumes with all the subjects simultaneously. Ketkar made this decision after having carefully observed what happened in the cases of *Andhra-Vidnyan Sarva-Svam* and the encyclopedia in Bengali language. The editors of these two encyclopedias first decided upon the subjects and then collecting information accordingly published the volumes one after another. In the process some subjects were omitted. Therefore the volumes remained incomplete. Ketkar's decision brought the *Dnyankosha* to perfection. It was more successful than the two encyclopedia mentioned above. *Dnyankosha* reveals the editor's aim to keep the quality of scholarship as high as possible. The plan instructed the editors how many pages should be allotted to each subject, what sub-topics should be included in every topic, what terminology should be used, how much importance should be given to academic and practical knowledge and so on. In the plan it was declared that the *Dnyankosha* would have a complete index. With full confidence, Ketkar said he was determined to accomplish the work within five years, editing and publishing the work according to the schedule.

After the plan was published, Ketkar expected constructive criticism on the scheme. Not more than four or five critics took the published scheme into account. The idea of an encyclopedia must have been new to the scholars in Maharashtra. Perhaps, many did not dare to criticize the plan. Or, some scholars, out of their usual lethargy and laziness, must have overlooked it. As there was not much criticism, Ketkar's scheme lost the chance of being wholly faultless. He had to depend on his own intellect to reach his goal.

While preparing this scheme, Ketkar had some high and all-pervading aim in his mind's eye. He had prepared the plan to achieve the aim. He knew that though the scheme was published, people would not grasp its significance unless they understood the aim of the *Dnyankosha*. With a view to making all Maharashtra co-operate with him and take interest in the huge work, Ketkar wrote two articles in *Lokashikshan*. The gist of the two articles published in the two issues is as follows : (1) *Maharashtriya Dnyankosha* is a link between traditional knowledge and future situations. (2) Its duty is to select significant literature published so far. (3) Many writers in Marathi have dealt with one and the same subject in different words and phrases. The *Dnyankosha* aims at making Marathi language stable by putting an end to diverse expressions. (4) If some knowledge which the scholars of Maharashtra possess is not expressed in Marathi, it will be given chance to be expressed. (5) In *Maharashtra Dnyankosha*, western culture and traditional culture will be united. (6) The society of Maharashtra is not able to do anything except agricultural work and some other works that educated class engages in. The *Dnyankosha* deems it its duty to enlarge the society's field of activities by empowering the people with literature as far as possible. (7) It is the *Dnyankosha's* duty to point out noble and mature activities found anywhere in society. (8) Bearing in mind the interests and well-being of Hindus, especially of Maharashtra society the *Dnyanakosha* will place helpful information before its readers...we must try to bridge the vast gulf between common people and those who have been researching into the problems of our country.

Scholars who were Ketkar's contemporaries and the leading class of society must have seen how his attitude towards the *Dnyankosha* was insightful and all-pervading. In Ketkar's view it was not only the compilation of knowledge but also a powerful means to resurrect language, culture, economics and politics.

When Ketkar began to edit the encyclopedia, he faced one obstacle. In order to compile selected knowledge from all the books in Marathi the availability of a bibliography of all the books became essential. That kind of a bibliography did not exist then. Ketkar knew he would have to start from scratch. So he decided to edit the bibliography of Marathi books. He entrusted Y.R. Date and R.T. Deshmukh with the work of preparing and editing the bibliography. Both the editors completed the work with the utmost responsibility and efficiency. They made use of many documents such as government reports, lists of books made by the Deccan Vernacular society during the period from 1810-1900, the periodicals kept in Mumbai Granth Sangrahalay and the books in the libraries of Nagpur, Pune and Mumbai. They made entries of articles published in periodicals, monthlies and weeklies. The editors finished the work within seventy days.

Such bibliography had not been prepared before in any other Indian language. So it proved to be unique in the field of bibliographies in Marathi. Only five hundred copies were published and that too hesitantly but unexpectedly all the copies were sold out by 1927. The sale nearly covered the cost of production. The bibliography was the first production of the *Dnyankosha.* Company that appeared before the public. The bibliography which was produced with utmost care and on a comprehensive scale and was brought out with Ketkar's scholarly 40 page foreword, at once won the favour of the public. At least the beginning of the *Dnyankosha* was a grand success.

Well-began is half done!

Translated from Marathi by A.N. Pednekar

On Writing Victor Hugo's Biography*

Jean-Marc Hovasse

* * * * *

Amongst all the great men in the history of mankind, writers, musicians, painters, figures or spiritual leaders, Victor Hugo is undoubtedly the one about whom the maximum is known. Books of records to measure things like this don't exist yet, but if they did, he would surely take the first place and for several reasons. Firstly, because he was famous while still very young (since his adolescence), he lived a very long life and he knew everybody, so much so that testimonies about him are innumerable. Secondly, he wrote a great deal and preserved everything, or nearly: thus, his accounts, for instance, make it possible to ascertain, to the last penny, how much he spent on such and such a day, and where, etc. His diaries also make it possible sometimes to follow him hour by hour. So much so that the purely chronological progress of Victor Hugo's life is not only well-known, but available on a daily basis on internet, thanks to the site created by the Hugo Group of Paris University 7 (http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/ChronoHugo/), based on the chronology of publication of Victor Hugo's entire works in the 1960's, up to the French Book club. Presenting an entire overview of the 19th century, it can be interrogated by date, and thus makes it possible to know Victor Hugo's activity on any given date from his birth (26 February 1802) to his death (22 May 1885). It is unnecessary to specify that there is no other personality to date who benefits from such a database, which, moreover is being constantly updated, since the electronic medium makes permanent enhancement possible. This instantly available immense database obviously makes it impossible to write the biography of Victor Hugo like one would of any oth author.

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* Parts of a lecture delivered at the Sahitya Akademi in 2002.

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My real model is however based on the concept of the Englis biography that barely exists in the French tradition: a simple stor clear and within everyone's reach, but with faultless erudition support this simplicity, and sound annotation for those who wis to delve further. Truly, the English do very good quality work this field, both for the general public and the specialists. Graha Robb's biography, for example, has this exceptional quality of mixin the two genres, pleasing to read by satisfying the curiosity of the readers, and being at the same time serious, intelligent and usef for researchers thanks to its critical apparatus. The only thing th I could reproach him for is perhaps that, which nevertheless contributes to the quality: his "English" perception, that is to say, a ver detached and deliberately ironic, indeed cruel, look at Victor Hug In any case, no biography written in French is a patch on Graha Robb's. The problem is that in France we are used to considerin biography like a light story, a sort of novel for which there is n need to be a specialist on the body of work. All it takes is som sympathy (or real antipathy) for the author we are talking abo and being able to write more or less in French. But this is not enoug A good biography like a successful surgery, can only be done b a real specialist. Besides, a biography is not just the accumulatio of details on the life of the author. From this point of view, I wi willingly distinguish the English model from its American counterpa —those enormous biographies that list thousands of bits of absolutel useless information, where the life of the author is minutely lai out for you, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. I mus defend myself against this model, because the size of my book lend to misunderstanding: unopened, you could easily believe that it i an 'American style' biography.

But I had to take the risk of this comparison, because th biography that I wished to write, intended to be bound in a singl volume, was in fact impossible to undertake successfully in th format: I rather quickly realized that if I wanted to present an origin work, I needed the space in which to do it, and that only a thousan pages, as astonishing as that might seem, would make it possibl for me to shed new light on the subject. My publisher was no expecting a first installment of a thousand four hundred paper bu he was understanding and ended up accepting the concept of tw fat volumes. It is this that enables me to do full justice to the last thirty-five years, without having to forego either Hugo's texts, or the other elements that are often neglected, like his relationships with other writers, especially through his correspondence. It provides considerable enhancement for a biographer to multiply the points of view, and to introduce the perspectives of other contemporaries like Stendhal, Balzac or Flaubert. But the essential part remains the interaction between the life and the work, absent or deficient in most biographies. As far as I am I concerned, I cannot imagine writing the biography of a writer without taking into account his texts, his work. The event-based recital is only part of the biography, inseparable from the production of the work, the link between life and writing, publication, reception. Sometimes, of course, the gaps are inevitable: for everything to do with childhood, till the time when the author starts writing, I use much later books in which he specifically speaks of his childhood. Here, as elsewhere, my principle was to utilize the entirety of the works. Because, as opposed to most of his contemporaries, from Chateaubriand to Verlaine, and passing by Lamartine, the author of *Les Miserables* never wrote a real autobiography. On the other hand, he saturated all his books (poems, novels, history and even, which is rarer, theatre) with memories, intimate revelations and fragmentary confessions. The last words of *Les Contemplations*, his largest collection of poems, is a good example of this:

> A destiny is written there day by day. Is this then the life of a man? Yes, and the lives of other men too. None of us have the honour of a life that is only one's own. My life is yours, your life is mine, you live what I see; our destiny is one. Take this mirror then and see yourself in it. There are sometimes complaints about authors who say 'I.' Speak to us of us, they shout. Alas! When I speak to you of myself, I speak of you. How can you not sense this? Ah! Fool, who does not believe that I am you! This book contains, we repeat, as much of the individuality of the reader as that of the author. Homo sum. Go through the tumult, the noise, the dream, the battle, the pleasure, the labour, the pain, the silence; to dwell in sacrifice and there, contemplate God; to begin with the Crowd and end with Solitude, is this not, in reserved individual proportions, the story of all?

Thus Victor Hugo presented *Les Contemplations* as a poetic autobiography that was both personal and shared, individual and collective. The memories are metamorphosed into works of art i it. However, what is true of *Les Contemplations* is also true of the other books: across his complete works, Hugo himself gave the true form to his memories. Suddenly, Pierre Audiat author in 1947 of a good biography of Victor Hugo entitled *Ainsi vecut Victor Hugo* (Thus lived Victor Hugo lucidly that notes when one has the intention of recounting his life, "you are fatally led to competing with Victor Hugo himself on a ground where you are certain, not of being beaten, but crushed." This prospect does not stop those who take the pains to think about it; other biographers who are by nature unthinking (in France, once again, these are often novelists or journalists hunting about for subject matter) are not even aware that this competition crushes them. They are like translators who are untrue to the words written by Victor Hugo, in his essay on William Shakespeare published in 1864:

> They know more than the masters. They are cleverer than the genius, these idiots.The true translator, the preponderant and definitive translator, being intelligent, subjugates himself to the original, and subjugates himself fully. Superiority reveals itself in this sovereign obedience. The excellent translator obeys the poet like the mirror obeys the light, by reflecting the dazzle. To be this real mirror; a rare quality that Moliere sought in the presence of Plautus, and Chateaubriand in the presence of Milton. Greater faithfulness produces greater radiance.

These words of Victor Hugo on translators, to be a "living mirror" was not the rule — for no one can claim to always conform to this — but was at least the objective of this new biography. After these declarations of intention, I wish to now elucidate certain principles that guided — and continue to guide — the writing of my biography of Victor Hugo:

The first is to refuse all the preconceived notions about the author: these are numerous and dogged, for each stage of his existence. This permanent obligation to verify and criticize makes it necessary to go back to the earliest origin every time. Once the source of an idea passed down is found (in some work in the early twentieth century or while the author was still alive), it becomes easier to pass it through a critical sieve by simply taking into account the context in which it was put out (a gratuitous attack on Victor Hugo by a virulent author, or quite to the contrary, hyperbolic praise from a blinded admirer, etc.) By applying this treatment as systematically as possible, we become aware that most of the better established legends rest on imaginary testimony; they do not hold up to analysis, or rather to the research of the origins.

The second principle consists in the biographer fading into the background as far as possible behind his subject: Victor Hugo, as opposed to what we believed for a long time, or pretended to believe, needs no one to defend him. That may seem obvious but it is undoubtedly one of the main innovations of this biography: till now the life of Victor Hugo was written to laud the glory of the master (Alfred Barbou, *Victor Hugo et son temps, (Victor Hugo and his time*))* or to knock him off the pedestal (Edmond Bire, *Victor Hugo).* In both cases, and perhaps paradoxically more with the former than the latter, he was done a disservice. My principle is to never judge, but rather, as objectively as possible, to present the reader with all the elements necessary to form his own judgement. From a purely linguistic perspective, this principle led me to systematically forgo the use of the first person: the "I" is banished. This choice can seem artificial but as a consequence, the voice of the author naturally takes precedence over the voice of the biographer. This is the best way that I found to always put forward Victor Hugo's own texts. Rather than perpetuating the tradition of biographers who attribute to themselves the words of their subject by deliberately omitting inverted commas, here it is a question of letting the author speak.

The difficulty with Victor Hugo is in finding out where in his works, in which detail of such and such a novel, in which verse or in which fragment he has hidden the words that interest us. It is therefore necessary to constantly, even when you have chosen to proceed chronologically, to round up all his work. And generally, with a certain amount of practice as well as long familiarity with his work, you end up always finding the passage you were looking for. The methodology is then simple: it is enough to present the fragment, to quote it, and to bring together all the elements that are necessary to understand it. The longevity of Victor Hugo entails the necessity of accompanying a quotation with the approximate date without which its resentation is necessarily biased; Hugo evolved all his life towards truth and always claimed the right to contradict himself. If, without mentioning it, when he is sixty, you quote a sentence that he wrote when he was twenty, you could very well have him say just about anything or render his behaviour ridiculous or incomprehensible.

The third principle of writing, which I have already spoken about, is to not sacrifice the work in favour of the life. It is a question of, more or less, writing a biography as much with the use of the documents normally reserved for biographers (correspondence and diaries) as the use of the literary work. This principle, perhaps contestable in some cases, is essential for Victor Hugo: whether it is about a poem written on a great event in French History (death of King Louis XVIII, coronation of King Charles X, revolution of July 1830, poems written during the coup of 1851 or the Commune of Paris), or an event in his private life (love for his wife Adele, meeting with his mistress Juliette Drouet, death of his daughter Leopoldine), each of Victor Hugo's works is narrowly linked to the context that gave it birth. And what is true of the poems is also, certainly in varying degrees, true of his novels, plays and other writings by the author (travelogues, obviously, but also works on history and critical essays). The principle of giving the work as much importance as the life nevertheless runs into a great difficulty: where does one stop in the presentation of the works and especially the works on which almost inexhaustible critical literature exists? The most coherent choice that I found, consisted in favouring the biographical clarity. Also, by abandoning the attempt to strive for illusionary exhaustiveness, the treatment reserved for great works like *Notre-Dame de Paris (The Hunchback of Notre Dame)* or Les Feuilles d'automne (*Autumn Leaves*) is guided by the biographical approach: it is a question of seeing where the knowledge of a life of the author can renew the approach to the works. There is a triple difficulty: it is necessary to also give an image of the work's contents, to seek out what might be autobiographical and also take into account what the critique could say about it.

The fourth principle of this new biography is of conceiving it for the largest possible audience, to interest both those who might never have read a work by Victor Hugo as well as the specialists. This choice, besides, comes directly from the watchword coined by Victor Hugo: "Everything for all." I believe that a very large audience can be addressed without having to make a compromise with exactitude and without demagogy. I try not to bypass the most famous pieces because finally these are the last of Victor Hugo's texts to belong to the collective memory...and they are in general as fine as the others. But naturally I did not prevent myself from quoting less known texts, even including the "Fragments dramatiques" ("Dramatic Fragments") for example, which are short sketches scribbled by Victor Hugo on rough paper.

This resolution to maintain simplicity was not the simplest and it involved some methodological reflection. The use of notes is one of them: initially meant for only containing references, in a certain number of cases, the development of a theme which would have possibly made the course of the text heavy for non-specialist readers made their way to the notes. They were finally rather numerous, but they were banished to the end of the book so that they would not interrupt continuous, and, what we call, "innocent" reading. Two types of reading are therefore possible. The text presents the minimum of references to critical debates or works of Victor Hugo specialists, current or past, but the notes rectify that. It is not a question of establishing a hierarchy of culture but of necessary division to enable all kinds of reading.

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Biography: A Māyā? The Indian Point of Departure*

Alokeranjan Dasgupta

The title of my essay is loosely transcreated from Max Frisch's play *Biographic: ein Spiel*. Kürmann, the protagonist of the play, assumes a typically Indian stance when he says:

> Biography! I am the last one to believe that our biography — mine or someone's else's — might not appear somewhat differently. Something altogether different. I have only to behave once in a slightly different way.

What intrigues us in this play is a prismatic sequence of transmigration of characters who do not seem to change fundamentally. The drama, instead of being enacted in its final version, remains until the end in a state of repetitive stage rehearsals. One could sense in this representation the prevalent Indian disposition towards the art of biography as sharply contrasting with the Western conception. When W.B. Yeats enigmatically asserts that as for our life it could be very well lived by our servants, or rhetorically questions whether one can know the dancer from the dance, or when, for instance, his once-close friend Rabindaranath Tagore remonstrates that 'you can never identify the poet from his biography,' one can perceive the Indian attitude. On the other hand, Max Frisch stops at one point to define the Western departure, in its down-to-the-here-and-now inclination; he emphasizes that it is not Kürmann's biography which should primarily engage our attention, but the fact that his condescending understanding of his being conditioned by a time-span results in a pattern of determinism — which is biographical.[1]

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* This article was read in an International Seminar held at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, during the summer term 1975).

Admitting the fact that the Indian art of biography is a derivative genre, it might be interesting to track down hypothetically its inchoate beginnings in Ancient India. Anachronism on the part of many a historian here provides us with meaningful cues. One notices how a historian like Radha Kumud Mookherjee overrates the biographical value of the Aśoka edicts[2], when, inspite of parabolic documentation verging on actuality, an aura of timelessness, and not of fate-bound temporality, dominates. Even in the celebrated Gupta era which witnessed in the fields of Architecture, Numismatics and Sculpture, robust drives at corporeality, one comes across pallid panegyrics replete with gloating, yet lifeless details. Bānabhatta's *Harṣacarita* (circa 7th century A.D.), which bears some laudatory references to the Gupta regency, has been termed 'Historical Kavya'. Compared to *Buddhacarita* (2nd century A.D.) by Asvaghoṣa it is, indeed, less legendary. But *Harṣacarita* too reads like a collection of stylized royal annals. The only royal chronicle written in Sanskrit which stands somewhat closer to life is Kalhana's *Rājataranginī* (1148-50). And yet it is very much marred by the artificial trammels of court poetry. Another specimen of this kind, though of a mediocre merit, is *Rāmacarita* (11th century) of Sandhyākar Nandin. This Māhakāvya depicts, almost with acrobatic dexterity, the life of Rāma of the *Rāmāyana* and the history of Rāmapāla of Bengal, simultaneously each in verse, by the device of punning and splitting up of word-units in different ways. He claims that his puns are not distressing (*akleśana*)[3]. But the abundance or absence of śleṣa or puns does not attest to the merit of any biography whatsoever.

The next group of biographical works, poised between the polar expectations of court and folk poetry, are more genuine, perhaps particularly because of this element of dichotomy. The most representative specimen is *Kumārpālacarita* of the Jaina Acārya Hemacandra (1089-1173). Its subtitle is *Dvyāśraya-Kāvya* which implies a double alliance to Sanskrit as well as to Prakrit. It has been duly disputed whether the Sanskrit part is more authentic than its Prakrit equivalent. No definitive view has been reached. There is no denying that the *Cariu-Kāvyas* written in Apabhramśa by the Jaina poets like Dhāhil and Puṣpadanta are narrated with more vital awareness of details. Vidyapāti's *Kīrtilatā* (15th century), which is a semi-historical record of Kīrtisiṃha's achievement, chiefly written in Avahaṭṭa, is also significant for this quality of extroversion. But the objective effect is definitely hampered whenever that poet uses Sanskrit. Here is a typical example:

> At dusk...Lotus flowers fade like the faces of queens of hostile kings sinking in their misfortune (for opposing Kīrtisiṃha). But Kīrtisiṃha, with folded hands, lay his continuous pious gifts, which can be offered only when the sun is up in the sky, and by distributing alms to brāhmanas by the hands of others, has made the dusk...as not dusk; may he protect the earth for a long time to come. Here ends the second branch of the creeper of fame of Vidyāpati[4].

By and by, however, realistic sense came to dominate in literatures of the New Indo-Aryan languages. None of these literatures is vitiated by the court atmosphere, although reinforced with religious bias. The biographical here curbs the royal, as well as the secular loyalties. But even in its most esoteric forms it contained certain biographical norms. Bhaṇitā, the mention of author's name, although initially confined to the concluding strophe at the proto-vernacular stage, extended with more ease and space in the later narratives in the shape of *Ātmaparicay* or self-portraits. In the interim, Bhakti-literature emerged and intensified this inclination. A pioneer literary historian commented; 'Biography is a distinctively Vaiṣṇava contribution to Middle Bengali; and by creating it the movement added a new *genre* to the literature of the country.' Here he added hesitatingly: 'But the prolifix and exuberant metrical narratives are often presented in a distorted perspective by no imagination which is ready to go to the utmost limits, or want of limits, of fanatical devotion.'[5] True, the historical here is very much defeated by the devotional, and *Carita* by *Caritāmṛta* or *Carita-bhāgavata*, but the identifying trait is that of fervent devotion, which reminds one invariably of the Catholic Lives-of-the-Saints tradition — especially the Italian and Spanish modes — and Boswell's sentimental portraiture of Johnson in recent times. Sometimes, as in the case of Nābhājidāsa's *Bhaktamāla*, which was rendered in many regional languages, this deifying tendency is carefully controlled. And if roomy elaboration, as critics such as Derek Jewell point out, be a salient feature of biography, then these hagiographical portraits do not fall short of the coveted norm.

But this is not the main point about these biographies. Their accent is deeply autobiographical. This autobiographical tendency gathered its momentum towards the last two decades of the fifteenth century and continued till the beginning of the eighteenth century in all the new Indo-Aryan literatures. The word 'bhakti' denotes the dissection of two components. It is interesting to notice that in many places these accounts recoiled, almost unconsciously, from the orbit of the desirable deity-like figure to the description of the empirical problems of the devotee. There we get a wealth of information not only about the immediate milieu of the author, but glowing, unabashed reports regarding his misgivings and pitfalls. This element of confession is well-documented. *Vinaypatrikā* (16th century) of Tulsidās is a case in point in the field of Awadhi. This book is 'remembered for its passages concerning poverty-stricken childhood of Tulsidās, if not for the author's pronounced devotional bent. In *Janamsakhi* (16th century), another work written in Hindi or West Punjabi, is depicted the life of Guru Nānak without blurring the confessional element.[6] The hymnic poems of Kabīr (1440-1518?) in Western Hindi, Assamese panegyrics of Śankardeva (1489-1569), *Abhangas* of Tukārām (1588-1649) in Middle Marathi, which glisten with lyrical radiance and the agony of confession, without naturally degenerating into sob-stuff—satisfy certain canons of autobiography. A certain tinge of self-consciousness (not of self-effacement) is here. One cannot call it a characteristic trait of South Indian literature. At the same time one must take into account that, already in the early fifteenth century Tamil, the deity Murugan inspired a poet like Arunagiria to write in autobiographical strain[7]. Instances could be multiplied here, but these examples suffice to substantiate the claim that medieval Indian literature is largely responsible for creating an Indian orientation towards its art of biography, in which mixed elements refuse to submit to neat classification.

The modern scene begins on the 4th May of 1800, along with the foundation of the Fort William College. William Carey, who was not merely a missionary, urged Rāmrām Bāsu 'to compose a history of one of their kings'[8]. What he really meant was the composition of a biography on the Western model. The result, *Pratāpādityacarita* (1801), is not wholly unsuccessful. Another book of history, *Rājābali* (1808), of Mrityunjay Vidyālankar, a close associate of Carey, examines the lives of some Indian kings and emperors. One who recollects the stronghold of the Christian Mission in Gujarat will not fail to observe that at about the same time, Devachandra, under the Western spell, wrote *Rājāvalikathā*, a book almost of the same title. It has been called 'a summary of Jaina traditions and history', but is essentially an attempt to combine the medieval Indian devotional and the modern Western historico-biographical norms.

A new element came into play, that of historical novel. The 'sacrifice of the truth of history to the truth of fiction' was noticeable. It is not the distortion of the historical events which one discerns as a blemish in the trend that followed. For one thing, the prose pieces of this category are in general tidily factual. Sometimes they assumed different garbs which did not always conform to any fixed literary mode. Navinchandra Sen (1847-1909) in Bengali, Harinārāyaṇ

Apte (1864-1919) in Marathi and Nārāyana Hemchandra in Gujarati are three conspicuously creative writers[9] who experimented along this line. To put it in another way, the emergence of the Indian novel and that of biography coincided at a moment when the flame of historical concern flickered momentarily.

In Urdu a new chapter opened with Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869), whose letters reveal biographical aspects. Tolstoy's description of letters as autobiography applies also to Ghalib's epistles, although in a very different context. When we study variegated biographical literature produced in the nineteenth century India, we cannot but observe that this comprised at its most likely the following literary forms: historical novel, historical drama, memoirs, letters, travelogue, conversation pieces, oratory and obituaries. It is extremely difficult to ignore the presence of biographical/autobiographical norms in these forms and they classify best under 'biography'.

The same observation may, to some extent, apply to its Western archetype too. But, barring a few examples, it is the ennobling content which gets the upper hand in the Indian biographies and not with their Western counterparts the form. Sometimes the same material has been cast in innumerable literary forms, as in the case of Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, and yet the ideal content does not really undergo any diversifying organic transformation[10]. The portrayal is always linear, monolithic, like characters in Victorian novels. Here one can generalize and say that, as far as modern Indian biography is concerned, it remains even today an applied concept of the Victorian ethos which established itself already in the nineteenth century Bengali fiction. The twentieth century Indian biographical literature inherits this ethos in the way of a naturalized legacy. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* remains the major Western model in this sphere. Although Strachey claimed in his biography 'to lay bare the facts as he understands them...dispassionately, impartially, and without any ulterior intentions,' he did not write with his coldly rational eyes. His study of Florence Nightingale, for example, forms an exquisite panegyric and offers an easy integration to the Indian scene. If we compare Satyacharan Sāstrī's (1865-1945) 19th century Bengali biography *Ṡivāji* (1895) with Bhīmsen Vidyālankār's recent Hindi biography *Ṡivāji*, we find the latter draws its inspiration from some of Strachey's portraits in their blend of mellowness and accuracy. The Bengali biography shows a moral orientation from the outset. The biographer retained his Victorian ethical concern to make his character match with it. The Hindi biography, despite the fact that it is written in the twentieth century, also sets out from the Victorian point of departure and does not let its hero grow owing to the biographer's Strachey-like fixity. Three interesting surveys of the biographical literature, namely *Hindi Sāhitya meñ jivancaritra kā vikās* (1958) by Candrāvati Singh, *Hindi rekhāchitra-udbhav āur vikās* (1964) by Kripashankar Singh, and *Bāngā Caritra Sāhitya* (1864) by Debipada Bhattacharya clearly substantiate that the Stracheyan model, which is at its best in compassionate idealization and decent retience, has come to stay in Indian biographical literatures. Even obituaries in leading Indian newspapers like *The Times of India* today will strike this attitude and say, 'In short, it's as wholesome as a good man's life'[11] or should one call it, in Rabindranath Tagore's way 'it is as wholesome as a greatman's life'. We should consider the fact that the gradation of goodness and greatness was a Victorian preoccupation and that Rabindranath who rated himself mock-seriously as a 'mid-Victorian', reminded us that we should in all cases concentrate only on the totality and not on the incomplete and imperfect aberrations of great men or personages.[12] Rabindranath's soberly apotheosizing attitude is summed up in his biographical sketches called '*Cāritrapūjā*.' The motivation here is different from the hero-worshiping of Carlyle, although the latter maintained that world-history is nothing but the biography of great men. Carlyle weighed the historical forces, whereas Rabindranath the normative ones. One should be cautious about drawing a tempting analogy between the Western and Indian biographies in respect of the concept of greatness. The American biographies published in the 1930's and 1940's, as Paul F. Lazarsfeld has observed, reflected a blind obligation to the supramundane. A comparatist may be tempted to show resemblance to the Indian scene. Lazarsfeld read sociological import in the 'anti-democratic leanings' of these biographies.[13] But one could very well say that the increasing number of biographies in India, as the charts indicate, is democratically motivated, in the sense that in a large number of those biographies peoples' cravings take a palpable shape not in the form of escape, but of a kind of collective projection. It is not the inaccessibility but the availability of these figures or idols which lend them a relevance in today's India. Omar Sharad's *Lokiyā ke Vicār* (1959) is one such biographical record which shows this Indian point of departure.

While observing the abounding of biographies in current English and Indian literatures, one should not lose sight of the two dissimilar qualitative criteria. A selection of the outstanding titles in English literatures of the last year showed the following figures: lives and history 45%, arts and poetry 4.3%, fiction 50.6%.[14] Stephen Spender made a value-judgement in this connexion when he specified this as a period 'when perhaps biographies are the best books written in England'. He asked: 'Is this because our mood is predominatly elegiac?'[15] This, despite the similar plenteousness of biography, would not be a relevant query in contemporary India. The motivation there, if any, is not nostalgic. Biographers in India are trying to uphold the prospective, and not the retrospective strain when all the perennial Indian values are corroding away. Looking back here implies leaping forward.

The chart showing the pre-1953 Indian scene is not singularly concerned with this problem of wearing away of values. Judging by the pan-Indian context, the biographical and historical literature of this period constitutes 13.5% of the total corpus 'quantitatively only next to fiction (30%) and poetry (19.8%). It was acclaimed as an important sector balancing the 'literature of knowledge' and 'literature of power.'[16] It slowly but certainly invaded the other areas of humanities including philosophy and religion as well as drama, fiction and personal essays.

The post-1953 chart, based on the publication of Sahitya Akademi and the National Book Trust (owing to the lack of any other up-to-date bibliographies) shows rather an uncanny boom of biographical literature. Its preponderance is at least 20.4%, only about 9% less than the miscellaneous section. This literature, produced under the official supervision of the above-mentioned literary boards, seems to edge out and encroach on all the other branches of literary endeavours, by way of bolstering, although not always in a very convincing way, the morale of the nation. The trouble with these sponsored biographies is not that they do not ring true, but that they do not ring at all. Sometimes this remedially written biographies are called 'National Biography' or '*Rāṣṭriya Caritmālā*,' sometimes 'Makers of Indian Literature'. As a result, one encounters here a heterogenous juxtaposition of the celebrities like Babar, Nānak, Confucius, Rajendra Prasād, Vivekānanda, even peculiarly enough, Machiavelli. Sadarangani, noted poet and critic, notices an element of imposition in all this and comments about the contemporary Sindhi literature: 'although there has been a growing tendency, after Independence, to produce biographies, specially of the national heroes, they are mostly translations and adaptations'.[17] This is unfortunately true of other regional literatures too wherever official sponsorship has made itself felt.

Sanskrit biographical works composed under the auspicious of pompous royal courts were rightly branded 'decadent'. Perhaps the whole of this new patronized literature deserves that epithet, although its sole aim is to fight decadence and keeping of standards in order to stop the blights on the face of *Swarāj*. The redeeming feature however, is that the biographers of the new India are awake to the situation of the society today and trying to break new ground independent of all kinds of sponsorship. Their virtue is not reduced by the fact that their biographies are accessible to the so-called neo-literate masses,'who are really 'unknown Indians', nor do they lose their worth because of their being branded as 'trivial bestsellers' by Indian critics today. Should it be wrong to say that Indian biography today is unhappily poised between māyā and reality, which in turn reflects the current Indian scene?

Notes

1. Frisch 1967
2. Mookherji 1961, 58
3. Dasgupta-De 1962, 339
4. Sāstri 1924, 21
5. De 1961, 34, 53
6. See Chatterjee 1963
7. Pillāi 1959, 348
8. Das 1966, 78, 81
9. Chatterjee, 230, 243, 299
10. AbanindranāthTagore modern twentieth century rendition is a solitary exception
11. 'An Immortal Passes', *The Times of India*, 18 February 1975
12. Thakur 1906, 540-41; also 190l, 452-55
13. Lazarsfeld 1941
14. Times, 1 December 1974
15. Spender, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 15 September 1974
16. B.S. Kesavan, in his introductory note to The National Bibliography of Indian Literature (190l-1953), specifies this section as history, biography (including autobiography and travel). In our list we have also added the epistolary literature. Kesavan says: 'This section includes books like Sardesāi's *Marathi Riyāsat, Kākā Kālelkar's Himālayān Pravās,* Jadunath Sarkar's works on *The Moghul Period* and Niharranjan Ray's *Bāngālir Itihās.*
17. Sadārangani l973, 293

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Prophet of Pain—J.M. Coetzee and His Novel *Disgrace*

Ranajit Das

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For me, the new literary millennium started with J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, literally as well as figuratively. I read this book in the year 2000 and was overwhelmed by it. Instantly I felt convinced that this novel was a new milestone of world literature. In Coetzee I have found an author whose literary objective is to reach the highest pinnacle of art. In 2001 I briefly recorded my unqualified praise about *Disgrace* in a published piece. Since then I have been deeply attracted to Coetzee's writings, and have read a number of his books, and my fascination for him is still as strong. In this year 2003, Coetzee won the Nobel Prize for literature.

By Nobel standards, he won the prize at a relatively young age of 63. Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940 and educated in South Africa and the United States. He was professor of general literature at Cape Town. As far as my information goes, he has now left South Africa and settled in Australia. Until recently his name was not very well-known in India, but he had already achieved almost an iconic status in the West that culminated in his winning the prize sooner than later. On this occasion, I write this article on *Disgrace* in order to have a glimpse of the nature and scope of Coetzee's art.

The novel *Disgrace* has a scintillating start. Those of us who write poetry and wax eloquent about the lightening beauty of a poem's opening line, do not usually consider the fact that the opening line of a novel is just as important to a novelist, and is crafted with just as much care. So what is the opening line of *Disgrace*? 'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well.' Isn't this quite captivating? And the reader will be amazed to see that Coetzee effortlessly sustains this captivating effect throughout this 220-page book till its last sentence. This, in itself, is a stupendous achievement in terms of form.

The novel's protagonist is David Lurie who teaches romantic literature at the Cape Town Technical University and is twice-divorced. How did he solve his problem of sex? On every Thursday afternoon he visits a prostitute named Soraya in a hotelroom. Both of them undress and go to bed. Soraya asks him, 'Have you missed me?' David replies, 'I miss you all the time.' (Although nothing is hinted in the narrative, yet the reader will have the uncanny feeling that Soraya's question is cordial, but David's reply is mechanical!) Thereafter they make love, and David returns as a satisfied customer. That's how the things are going on for the last one year.

What is the nature of David's libido? 'In the field of sex his temperament, though intense, has never been passionate. Were he to choose a totem, it would be the snake. Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest.'

And what kind of a woman is Soraya? She seems to be quite moralistic; she dislikes the tourist-women who bare their breasts on beaches and she calls their breasts 'udders'.

An affectionate relationship has developed between David and Soraya. 'Affection may not be love, but it is at least its cousin. Given their unpromising beginnings, they have been lucky, the two of them: he to have found her, she to have found him.'

I must state here that this cold, mute undertone of Coetzee's prose kept me spellbound throughout. It seemed to me that this prose is actually talking between the lines, or even beyond the lines! A middle-aged professor, having survived two failed marriages, has at least found some quiet meaning of life in his relationship with a prostitute. A very transient, a very pitiable, a very small meaning of life. Small, but transparent, and hard. The kind of small meaning of life with which just one small sentence can be written. A sentence which is very transparent and very hard: without any froth or fog of life. This I thought to be Coetzee's real desperate technique: to find out from the ever-brittle and ever-disintegrating meanings of life that minute particle of meaning which cannot be further broken down, and then to convert this minute meaning in a minute sentence. And to create broad commentaries of life by using this hard, minute sentences as philosophical bricks. So that the commentaries gain the strength of despair and do not fall apart as card-houses of hope.

After reading a couple of pages more, I suddenly return to this sentence I have quoted before : '...he to have found her, she to have found him.' In a flash it occurs to me that this sentence is nothing but the final sweet sentence of any ancient parable of love. And I shudder to discover the gloomy, dark metamorphosis of this blissful sentence in the hands of Coetzee!

I should mention here that what I am trying to do is to present the impressions of a close reading of the 10-page-long first chapter of the book, in order that through these impressions we can have some idea about Coetzee's style, subject and intentions—in one word, Coetzee's literary goal.

What kind of a person is David ? There is no one in the novel to answer this question. The author is there, but actually no author is there, there is no authorial voice. The entire novel has been written in the third person from the standpoint of David; but the reader will always feel that the story is being told in the first person by David himself. The author and David are merged into a single entity in the narrative. (Here I cannot but mention an interesting information. In his two volumes of autobiography named *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Youth*, Coetzee did not use the word 'I' in respect of himself; he wrote about himself in the third person, using the cold and detached 'he' — and a nameless 'he' for that matter – and thereby creating the same chilling effect of ruthless moral scrutiny that we find in his novels. I would love to know whether there is any other author who has written his autobiography in the third person! And on the basis of my reading of these two autobiographical accounts, I can definitely say that the character of David is deeply autobiographical.) As such, we are left with no alternative but to know about David from David himself. Being an extremely self-conscious man, David has been very generous in this respect. He has described and analysed his character in full detail, without rancour or self-pity. For example, David said about himself that although he had a desire to take Soraya out of the hotel to some other place and spend a whole night with her, but he never made this offer to Soraya for he knew that he would loathe to stay with her 'the morning after, when he will be cold, surly, impatient to be alone.' He did not want to 'subject her to a morning after.' (What the reader may almost miss here — for such is the camouflage of Coetzee's narrative technique — is the subtle compassion hidden in the passive coldness of David's character—a strange analytical sensitivity!) So, this is what David calls his 'temperament'. He knows it is impossible for him to change his temperament. 'The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body.' On reading this, the reader will immediately recall the textbook lessons of Greek tragedy; he will surely recognise behind the smokescreen of the humble word 'temperament' the grand old banner: 'character is destiny'. And in the overstated stubbornness of this temperament, the reader will suddenly identify that over-taught 'tragic flaw' of a heroic character. He will feel that Coetzee is presenting his protagonist in a classic copybook style, but with an entirely modern sensibility. Even a presentiment will dart through the reader's mind that David's life may soon be haunted by destiny, like a character in a Greek tragedy. (And right at the start of the second chapter the reader would find that his suspicion was right: David gets involved in a sexual scandal with a girl student who is about his daughter's age, and his life starts to disintegrate.)

David teaches linguistic communications to his students, the official principle of the subject being that man has discovered language in order to communicate his thoughts, feelings and purpose with other men. This is the theory that David teaches, but his own opinions are quite the contrary, which he keeps to himself. For he holds that 'the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul'. The novel is only at its fourth page, and I am stunned by this incredible insight. It seems to me that this profound poetic monologue is the culmination of all the collective voices of the great characters of modem literature like Melville's Captain Ahab, Dostoevosky's Raskolnikov and Kafka's Joseph K... I also wonder what more Coetzee can offer in the rest of the novel that would surpass this stupendous metaphysical insight? Or is it that this insight is the central theorem that will be proved in the rest of the novel? This question crosses my mind.

In his long career as a professor, David has published three collections of essays, one of which is about the poet Wordsworth. All the three books flopped. Now he wants to compose music, a chamber opera, which would be called 'Byron in Italy'. This opera would in fact be a meditation on love between the sexes.

David is urban, handsome and a lusty womaniser. 'He existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity. He had affairs with the wives of colleagues; he picked up tourists in bars. ...he slept with whores.' But suddenly he became old, his magnetism disappeared. 'Overnight he became a ghost.'

Now he thinks of retiring from this promiscuous life. He even ponders over the idea that old men after a certain age should castrate themselves. They might approach a doctor for this purpose, or they might even do it themselves, with the help of a medical textbook and a few tools.

One day David finds Soraya shopping with her two sons. Soraya also sees him. Thereafter Soraya disappears from that hotel, from his life. David sleeps with a prostitute who is younger than Soraya, but he is not satisfied. One day he employs a detective agency to know about Soraya's whereabouts. In no time he gets Soraya's real name, her address and telephone number. He calls in the morning when her husband and children are out. He wants to see her again. Soraya refuses and threatens him not to harass her anymore. David 'puts down the telephone. A shadow of envy passes over him for the husband he has never seen.'

The first chapter ends with the above sentence. My efforts at a close reading of that chapter also end here. Apart from the remarks I have already made in this endeavour, I have two further comments to add. First, the way Coetzee has depicted, in a short span of just 10 pages, the immense mindscape of the ennui and emptiness of modern life only testifies to his great narrative genius. Any lesser novelist would have taken at least a hundred pages to do the same. Second, in this cryptic story of David and Soraya's relationship we perhaps encountered one of the last love-stories of urban life, written, appropriately, in a fridge-cold, pathological language. That last remnant of a love-story which, in these times, is at all possible.

All the 24 chapters of *Disgrace* can be closely read in this manner. The rest of the story is as follows...

As has been mentioned before, David now gets involved in a sexual affair with one of his girl-students named Melanie. One rainy evening, (he takes Melanie to his residential quarters, dines with her, offers her coffee with a shot of whisky, and then gently touches her cheek. He says to her, 'Stay. Spend the night with me.' She asks, 'Why?' David replies, 'Because you ought to...Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.' (This cunning eloquence, the 'serpent's words', adds a strange poetic dimension to this otherwise ordinary tale of seduction.). Gradually the affair breaks off, Melanie complains to the authorities accusing David of sexual harassment. Everything snowballs into a full-scale scandal; a committee of inquiry is formed and David is summoned before it. Some members of the committee are sympathetic to David, for a stray affair between a professor and a girl-student is quite commonplace in a university campus, so these members discreetly request David to come to a compromise so that he does not lose his job. They ask David to apologise and repent. The sixth chapter contains an outstanding description of the hearing before the Committee. On reading this, the reader will be inclined to think that Coetzee is the best literary disciple of Kafka, and also that the disciple has almost excelled his guru by overcoming the guru's excessive undertone of melancholy and making the trial balanced and interesting even in its gloom. David takes a very stubborn and impatient stance in this hearing. The committee, for the sake of fair trial, hands to David a copy of Melanie's statement of accusation against him, but he does not bother to look at it. He instantly pleads guilty to the charges raised and seeks to be punished. The members of the Committee are annoyed and one of them remarks that David is actually slighting the Committee. They accuse David of being 'fundamentally evasive' and press him for a clear response. David says, 'Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go.' When finally the Committee asks David to issue a statement of apology in a spirit of repentance, he replies, '... we went through the repentance business yesterday. I told you what I thought. I won't do it. I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.' Through these two decisive dialogues, we now witness the full-scale appearance of — what has all along been gathering like storm-clouds in the background — the lightening flashes of metaphysics in the story. The metaphysics of God, religion and clergy. And in response thereto, the atheist's revolt and his worldview. In this lapidary crafting of these two dialogues, however, Coetzee could not excel Kafka; but made the most perfect copies of him. (It seems to me that in the art of formulating existential arguments in flawless legality, it is humanly impossible to surpass Kafka.)

David does not wait for the punishment to be announced. He leaves his job, leaves Cape Town, and goes to his daughter Lucy's small farmhouse in the suburbs. Like father, like daughter. Lucy is also a very stubborn, intelligent, independent-minded and sensitive character. She owns the farmhouse in a black-dominated area, lives alone, and runs the farm with the help of an aged black neighbour whose name is Petrus. And it is the time of Black-ruled South Africa after the end of apartheid. Petrus has two wives, a lot of children, but he has an eye on Lucy and her farmhouse too. At this stage we come across another major context of this multi-layered novel: the context of South Africa's history of apartheid and its fallout. Here the metaphysical torment is further aggravated by the turmoils of local history. (Having said that, I would urge all Coetzee-critics not to harp too much on this 'local history' factor; in Coetzee's novels, the historical reality of apartheid in South Africa is ultimately transformed into a timeless allegory of human condition, nothing more, nothing less.)

In order to pass his time at Lucy's place, David joins a charity animal welfare clinic as a volunteer. The clinic is run by one uncouth, middle-aged woman named Bev Shaw, with the help of a few volunteer animal-lovers. They treat sick, crippled and abandoned animals at the clinic, and kill those whose conditions are hopeless. As is David's won't, he starts sleeping with Bev Shaw, and proves himself quite a good hand at helping her at the clinic.

In an atmosphere of crime and lawlessness following the political freedom recently gained by the blacks, a terrible incident happens one day at Lucy's farmhouse. Three black youths forcibly enter the farmhouse, rape Lucy, try to burn David to death, and flee with David's car. David reports the matter to the police, but Lucy keeps mum about what has happened to her; rather she asks David not to say anything about her to the police.

Lucy gets pregnant from the rape. David gets angry with her for her decision to keep mum about the rape, but Lucy tells him with stoic firmness that she considers this assault on her as a historical due for her at this point of time in South Africa.

The novel ends with the death of David's favourite dog 'Driepoot' –'a young male with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it.' (The cover of the book shows a photograph of Driepoot, if I can put it in that way.). 'Its period of grace is almost over; soon it will have to submit to the needle.' David's feeling about Driepoot is unforgettable: 'he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog. Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows.'

The end of the novel is unbearably tragic, and the reader's heart sinks in deepest sorrow. Here Coetzee's existential despair, his dark vision of life have exceeded all the existing frontiers of modern literature, so it seemed to me.

In this ruthlessly pessimistic novel, I find one pro-life insight which is very deep and powerful. When Lucy tells her father that she is pregnant from the rape but she will not get rid of the child, David becomes stunned and annoyed. But somehow he reconciles with his daughter's sentiment and decides to stand by her till the child is born. (Again a very noble feeling on David's part, which has been so understated that it almost escapes the reader's notice.) David then asks Lucy whether she has started loving the unborn child. Lucy replies. The child? No. How could I? But I will. Love will grow—one can trust mother nature for that.' This profound insight – 'Love will grow – one can trust mother nature for that'

—seems to counterpoise the opening insight of 'rather overlarge and empty human soul'. This insight is one of the best offerings of the novel, and when I pondered over it as a clue to Coetzee's own worldview, I felt that Coetzee, rather unconsciously, viewed mother nature as something separate from God. Out of existential abhimana, Coetzee seems to suggest: mother nature is our own; she is full of love. God is not our own; God does not love.

All in all, *Disgrace* is a moving epic about the spiritual emptiness of modern man. The problem that any modernist writer faces in writing this kind of a novel has been faced by Coetzee too. This is the problem of self-deceit and concealment. This is the problem of writing an entire discourse, in a very cautious and coded language, narrating the writer's continuous quarrel with God, about God, without mentioning the word God as far as possible. So that nobody can brand the writer as a 'religious genius' and embarrass him; so that nobody can accuse his story of being a 'religious allegory'. In his essay 'Translating Kafka', Coetzee himself has accused Willa and Edwin Muir, the first English translators of Kafka, of doing a disservice to Kafka's modernity by proposing him as a 'religious genius' before the English readers, (source: *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999*, Vintage, 2002). (This modernist dilemma of hiding the skeleton of metaphysics in the cupboard of scepticism has almost assumed a comic proportion! For fear of being labelled as a believer, the atheist intellectuals' 'fear of God' has assumed a completely different and hilarious meaning!) In this respect, I would cite a very significant dialogue from the novel, which shows that Coetzee himself is keenly aware of his dilemma. In a dramatic moment of the story, David meets Melanie's father in order to apologise; an argument starts between them over the principles of life. Melanie's father agitatedly asks David, 'May I pronounce the word God in your hearing? You are not one of those people who get upset when they hear God's name?'

To my mind, the truth of the matter is that the existential discourse of the modernist writer is actually a kind of neo-metaphysical discourse, for 'God' as one of the main intellectual reference-points cannot be removed from such discourse without undermining its very structure. Undoubtedly, the novel *Disgrace* belongs to the literary tradition of this neo-metaphysical discourse in the line of Dostoevsky, Kafka and Beckett. But Coetzee's project was to rid his novel of all the trappings of a metaphysical novel — even of its highly concealed modern versions. And Coetzee is entirely successful in his project. He achieved this difficult goal by adopting a multi-layered plan in the conceptualisation and construction of his narrative. First, Coetzee avoided all kinds of emotion, imagination and idealisation in his literary device, and took the stance of an impassive truth-seeker, almost appearing as a linguistic bone-collector of reality. Second, he did not allow the least shade of fantasy to creep into his narrative, and remained steadfast to a solid realistic plot. Thirdly, Coetzee outdid all his predecessors in his total denial of the existence of any trace of spirituality in human nature in this novel. Therefore, although the, animal welfare clinic of this novel unmistakably appears to us as a religious allegory of the sick and abandoned humans bound for ignominious death, yet we are bound to admit that *Disgrace* is not a metaphysical novel. Whether Coetzee would be happy with this praise of ours, or whether he would become even more gloomy, we do not know.

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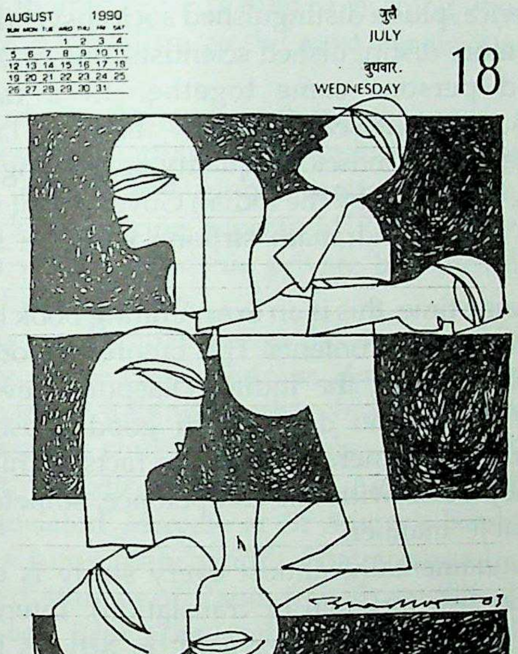

Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition, Edited by Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit Fairleigh Dickson University Press, Madison & Teaneck and Associated University Presses, London, 2003, Pp.297, Price not stated.

This is both a heartening and an exasperating book. It is heartening because of its provenance. It represents the proceedings of a conference on 'Rabindranath Tagore at the End of the Millenium' at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, in 1998. The speakers included a range of Indians and non-Indians from many disciplines based in North America, plus a distinguished socio-psychologist from Delhi, and two still more distinguished scientists, one of them from Britain. These varied persons came together in a fairly low-keyed, unselfconscious and (it seems) locally inspired Tagore conference. I find its local unselfconscious quality reassuring–more so than a gala jamboree organised by the Indian Government would have been. It is good to see Rabindranath striking roots on foreign academic soil.

At the same time, this is an exasperating book because of certain basic problems with its contents. The Tagorean roots have not struck very deep, even among the Indian Diaspora. Several contributors thus feel the need – no doubt with good cause – to showcase Rabindranath and enumerate the basic facts of his life and times. Sometimes they do so with fair competence, sometimes in a halting and questionable manner.

More fundamentally, almost every study is confined to texts available in English (original or translation). Interestingly, the few references to the Bengali occur chiefly in articles by non-Bengalis. The writers seem unaware of the inadequacy of the English text as a guide to the Bengali; still more of the vast body of untranslated work, whose presence must be admitted even if not brought into the argument. Hence few, if any, contributors display a sense of the growth, change and simple variety of Rabindranath's sensibility. There are added misconceptions, like Lalita Pandit's notion that Rabindranath himself translated *Gora*. (It was actually W. W. Pearson.)

Purnima Mehta states that Rabindranath's mother's death cannot be accurately dated. It is clearly recorded as 27 Phalgun 1281 or 10 March 1875, in the poet's fourteenth year (not, as Mehta 'suspects', between the 'eighth and tenth'). There are also deficiencies in some crucial editorial inputs. There is no uniform style of transliteration. The only dates cited for all works, in both text and notes, are of the editions used, blurring the sense of chronology and often appearing to make Rabindranath say or write things decades after his death.

Such a narrow historical and contextual base means that Rabindranath's discourse is very selectively defined. Monish R. Chatterjee, for instance, outlines the poet's engagement with science only by a gallop through casual, almost accidental links with scientists and scientific activity in Bengal at that time; while his dubbing Rabindranath 'an ascetic *à la* the ancient *rishis* of India at heart' is questionable at best. Similarly, Manju Radhakrishnan and Debasmita Roychowdhury's account of Rabindranath on nationalism is both simplistic and partial, virtually stating that his critique of nationalism was directed chiefly at the Indian Freedom Movement from a strongly pro-Western standpoint. There is little or nothing about his fervent attack on Western nationalism as the most pernicious international force of the time.

Bandana Purkayastha's approach is rather more sophisticated, with some interesting plotting of Rabindranath's thought against current feminist trends and global capitalism. But Purkayastha overlooks other, less edifying aspects of Rabindranath's treatment of women in his writings and his private life, including the early marrying-off of his daughters.

Qualitatively comparable, though different in subject, is Kathleen O'Connell's study of the essay *Shikshar Herpher*. O'Connell offers a competent summary of Rabindranath's views on education; but her analysis of the essay is simplistic. It is also marred by glitches like calling Aghornath Chattopadhyay 'Mr Aghor', and saying that Rabindranath translated *Macbeth* at St Xavier's School. (In fact he did so under his tutor Jnanchandra Bhattacharya.)

Like the two studies of Rabindranath's political thought, the two articles on *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)* offer a contrast in method. Kathleen Koljian's reading is greatly simplified: she seems to find a total rejection even of the broader Swadeshi ethos by the end of the novel, as well as Bimala's utter subjection to Nikhilesh, presented as a grimly patriarchal figure. Cynthia Leenerts, by contrast, takes a more balanced view of the work, though her explanation of the contrast between Rabindranath's book and Satyajit Ray's film is dubious in the extreme. Leenerts seems to accept at face value the discontents of the more emancipated section of Indian womanhood, as expressed in the patently exaggerated claim that they are less free than their pre-Independence foremothers.

Sadly, the pieces by the two editors are among the weakest in the book. Lalita Pandit provides a breathless amalgam of Indian and Western critical thought from classical times to the present, with equal violence to both traditions. This is in aid of the amazing conclusion that the dominant *rasa* of *Gora* is the erotic *shringara* - a view declaredly based on the dust-jacket of Agyeya's Hindi version. After this, it seems superfluous to point out the incidental problems with her piece.

This may also be the place to mention Purnima Mehta's reading of Rabindranath's poems for and about children in the light of modern child psychology. While the connexions might, for ought we know, be plain to a professional psychologist like Mehta, she does not clarify them for the common reader, even as she scrambles many biographical details into the bargain.

Patrick Hogan, the other editor, sees *Gora* as Rabindranath's attempt at 'writing back' against the dominant Western literary tradition–as represented by the novels of Jane Austen. This *lucus a non lucendo* is supported by the thinnest of parallels (dislodging Austen's English and European literary provenance in the process). The beauty of this strategy is that any chance parallel becomes grist for Hogan's mill, while the glaring dissimilarities are explained by the dissent implicit in 'writing back'. Hogan can have his cake and eat it too.

By contrast, Jaya Mehta offers an eminently acceptable, if not specially original, reading of *Gora* as 'writing back' against Kipling's *Kim*. In fairness to Hogan, his introduction to the volume is a much more competent piece of work. Given the need for a brief opening outline of Rabindranath's life, times and work, Hogan does as good a job as any, with few tangles and glitches.

I can thus pass thankfully to the virtues of the book. It is disconcerting to have found so much to dispraise in a well-intentioned volume that promises a richer harvest of Tagore studies in the West. But surely the time has come when mere recognition of Rabindranath abroad should not cause us uncritical gratification. Nor should diasporic Indians feel either obliged or privileged to speak or write about him without due care and training. Tagore studies in the West must call for the same rigour that Indian scholars of, say, Shakespeare need to adopt if they wish Western academia to take their work seriously. And so to the rewards the book holds out. One obvious gain is the documentation and historical account offered by certain articles. Nobuko Yamasaki gives a clear, detailed account of the relations between Rabindranath and Noguchi. Joseph Lennon's study of the better-explored relation between Rabindranath and Yeats is refreshing in its freedom from the bardolatrous partiality of most Bengali accounts. Lennon's views on Rabindranath are not irrefutable (for instance, he clearly overstresses the Vaishnav element in the English *Gitanjali*). The real value of his piece lies in the angle on Yeats, and his exploration of the 'Celtic Orientalism' of the Irish Revival.

On a different plane altogether are two pieces by outstanding scientific thinkers, Jonathan Shear and the Nobel Laureate Brian Josephson. Expectedly, both base themselves on the Tagore-Einstein dialogues; they are understandably unaware of the answering notes in Rabindranath's other works. It does not matter, as both writers are essentially unfolding epistemological and metaphysical themes of their own. Rabindranath is, so to speak, incidental to their arguments. But the marginality carries its own value, for it places the poet within a crucial, broad-ranging international discourse. It is as good a way as any of ensuring for Rabindranath his due place in the world.

This is also ensured by Judith Plotz's well-documented essay (moving us precisely by the impact of its documentation) on the performance of *Dakghar (The Post Office)* in Janusz Korczak's orphan's home in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. Only days later, the children and their guardians were rounded up by the Nazis. The place of Rabindranath's text — agonisingly marginal yet utterly central –– in this outrage, implants his play with a value we might otherwise not have found in it. Had Rabindranath lived to learn of the performance, he would have been moved and humbled.

And so finally to the broader context of such violence, and the assertion of humane creativity in the teeth of such violence, in Ashis Nandy's article. This was the keynote address at the conference, but is wisely printed at the end of the book, as it opens up the wider implications of Rabindranath's work. There is little mention of the poet, and perhaps too much of Nandy, over a good part of the article; but Nandy is right in seeing his speculations as the legacy of Rabindranath and the Bengal Renaissance. His reception of that legacy is highly critical, and may raise conservative hackles (as might such slips as citing *The Sacrifice* as a translation of *Rajarshi*, or dating Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in 'our times'). But allowing for a measure of overkill, his suggestions must be valued seriously by everyone committed to preserving that legacy. Briefly, they are: read Rabindranath critically; allow creative liberties with his work; and access him directly rather than through the Tagore establishment.

These directives may be more relevant for Tagoreans in Bengal and India than in the West. They can help to ensure a more fruitful absorption of Rabindranath in his native land. And this, in turn, will finally afford the *Vishwakavi* his due place in the world's eyes.

Sukanta Chaudhury

Shakti—Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Women's Empowerment in India, by Ranjana Harish, Bharathi Harishankar, Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi, 2003 Pp. 327, Rs. 595/-

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This volume includes papers presented in English in a seminar held in Gujarat University, Ahmedabad. The editors got the idea of the seminar from the declaration of the first year of the new millennium as that of Women's Empowerment and the compilation of a National Policy for its advancement. In conceiving its scope and identifying the subjects, they went beyond the rhetorical agenda of the government.

The volume begins with Indira Goswami's inaugural address. Entitled 'My Journey as a Writer' it traces the trajectory of her writings, from incipient beginnings to its climatic stage when she got the prestigious Jnanpith Award. After the sudden death of her husband in the prime of his youth, she, as a young widow, relied upon her innate resources which not only gave her the strength to face ordeals in life but also enabled her to bring forth her writings. For her it is *Shakti* that turned her powerless being into empowered becoming. In the Afterword, Shashi Deshpande, the famous Indo-English novelist, terms this idea of *Shakti* as the under-text of the myth that only exceptional women, in rare situations, can wield. So the issue at stake is the empowerment of ordinary women in human terms. This is empowerment of the participatory type that the celebrated American poetess, Adrienne Rich, so candidly expresses in the lines quoted before the Contents.

Without visualizing any rupture between these two versions of empowerment, most of the papers included in the volume hearken to the latter, in the process upholding the former for form's sake only. The spheres in which empowerment is sought or its lack is regretted, range from law and management to language, literature, painting, folklore, memoirs, autobiographies and scriptures. Ila Pathak describes in detail the efforts she, alongwith other members of AWAG, had to put in to sensitize the police and the judiciary for taking legal action against vulgar plays employing obscene expressions and presenting women as sex objects of the basest type. N K Pathak enumerates various Articles of the Constitution to show that provisions for empowering women are not lacking in it. The conclusion drawn is circumspect, not so much to end inequality as to restore universal justice. Though brief, Nutan Damor's paper goes all the way to prove how the Dalit and tribal women have to suffer triple oppression of caste, class and gender. In this way, they are in a situation that is hapless and hopeless at the same time.

The next section includes four papers dealing with women in management, development, entrepreneurship and the media. Such is the nature of women that they should excel in managerial and executive positions. As Sarla Achuthan so astutely mentions they are not to be found there for various reasons, domestic, organizational, gender specific, educational and tradition-based. To show the true way to empower women, Rajasi Clerk distinguishes it from sheer development. She is of the view that the disposition to have control over life and the levers of power is more crucial. Whereas Sirai Mehta's paper on women entrepreneurs is matter of fact, Malti Mehta has acute observations to make about women in the media. The brevity of her paper hinders her from elaborating why they must focus on dialogue with gender-sensitive men working at all levels in the media.

On the whole, these papers are largely explicative but the later are critical and thought-provoking. Neera Desai, in her paper, "Women's Studies", traces the history of this academic discipline, identifies the dimensions it has acquired in the course of three decades and pleads to keep it close to activism. This is a controversial plea likely to cut both ways. More dispassionate is Javed Khan's paper, "Women's Language". He evinces thorough understanding of distinctions marking women's linguistic articulation, particularly as a speech variety. For all this, he disagrees with Robin Lakoff and linguists of the sort that this speech variety, elements of which get into writing also, is an independent and autonomous language. More important is to hearken to a language that resolves the oppositions marking speech varieties of men as well as women. Shilpa Das's paper on "School Textbooks" deconstructs the gender-specific biases, which, as examples, illustrations and quotations, leave a permanent mark on the attitudes of the boys and girls. The remedial measures, she suggests, may sound simple but the sanity they reflect cannot be discounted.

The next section has three papers in which painting as a vocation for women, their portrayal by male artists for gazers of their gender and self-portrayal by female artists to express their innermost feelings, are discussed in sensitive and subtle ways. Grappling with forms, words and images, Esther Davis lays bare the dimensions of her creative process. Her incessant struggle with the medium, in sculpture with stone or wood and in literature with language, has its own boundaries and bonds. She forwards it so candidly in this autobiographical piece. Saptam Patel's paper deals with the dilemma Emily Carr, the Canadian painter later to become a writer, had to reckon with to advance from a subject position in painting to that of its correlative in writing. What distinguishes them from each other is that in painting the subject remains the object while in writing it rises above its personal constraints. So be it, for Emily Carr who had to struggle a lot to advance from her marginal position or for Frida Kahio whose concern with the self verged on an endless obsession. Can it be said about Amrita Sher-Gil as well whose self-portraits strike a counterpoint with her paintings?

Parul Dave Mukherji's long paper deals with women as objects and subjects of visual representation. To work out their representation as objects, he brings under purview the ancient art of the East and the West, mother-goddesses sculpted in the nude, the Hellenistic art, the *Yakshi* figures inspired by Buddhism and the *mithuna* figures at Khajuraho. He believes that the early nude works carry affirmative meanings, implying that they are not objects of titillation for the male gaze. In this regard, he is indebted to John Berger, the eminent art critic who at the same time draws a subtle distinction between nudity and nakedness in painting. Unmindful of this distinction, Mukherji fails to evaluate the past significance, present meaning and may be future value of Amrita Sher-Gil's self-portrait in which she stands naked above the waist. Though her breasts are prominent yet the gaze does not stop at them. It rises to her protruding lips and piercing but thoughtful eyes, which seem to convey some crucial message, profounder than the erotic. This is the richest image of an empowered woman. Why, to the contrary, the contemporary women painters in India have to portray powerlessness, comes out so well in his discussion of Arpita Singh, Nalani Malani, Rumanna Hussain, Nilima Sheikh and others.

The remaining papers deal with folklore, literature and the scriptures. Darshana Trivedi shows how in the Gujarati folklore *dasi/ devi* images of women figure in juxtaposition. It is impossible to form a coherent view of their empowerment from their autochthonous treatment in the folklore. Neeta Khurana delves into the private worlds of the Indian maharanis to show how marginal and vulnerable they were in spite of all their ostentation. Yashodhan Joshi's reading of Scrapbooks is objective and empathic at the same time. The interlocutor, Govadhanram, poses to himself questions relating to his wife and daughter to which there are no easy answers. The most comprehensive is Anupam Nagar's 'Critiquing Tagore's Views on Women'. Tagore's visionary reflection on the human personality and creative unity had convinced the poet that in the system of Nature, Woman is akin with creativity, sympathy, responsibility, harmony, sacrifice and reciprocity. Armed with this understanding, Nagar analyses Tagore's three plays to show that in *Chitra, Sanyasi* and *Chandalika* philosophical validity carries artistic veracity as well. No wonder Tagore's visionary writings have the potential to replenish Man/Woman relationship now and ever in the future.

Two papers deal with the scriptures. Sunanda Shastri goes to the ancient Indian texts, the *Smritis*, to show that the rules and regulations laid down in them for women are rigorous. Nevertheless, they have interstices showing the well-being of women. It is doubtful if their proper implementation can empower them in the true sense of the word. Jean D'souza's study of God and Eve in the Bible is remarkable, to say the least. Very cogently, it brings out what different versions of the creation story show. To begin with, God created Eve from Adam's rib to lessen his loneliness. When she persuades him to eat the apple, it is not just because Satan has put it in her head. To enhance her knowledge and that of her companion, she takes this hazardous step. In this way, her act is not negative because it grows from disobedience. It is positive for decentralizing the power and authority of the subject on the one hand and the impotence and powerlessness of the object on the other. How one wishes the volume to have carried such innovative papers on the Buddhist, Islamic and Sikh scriptures as well! So far as the Sikh scriptures go, it can certainly be vouchsafed that there is so much pertaining to all this in *Guru Granth* and the writings of Guru Gobind Singh.

Tejwant Singh Gill

Crossings: Stories from Bangladesh and India, Compiled and Translated by Radha Chakravarty; Indialog Publications Pvt Ltd.,New Delhi, 2003, Pp.280; Rs.250/-

Crossings, a collection of twenty Bengali stories from Bangladesh and India, emerges, as the author tells us, from a sense of necessity to build "bridges of understanding in our fast changing, globally connected yet ever more divided world." Target readers then are not non-Bengali Indians, but as the word "global' suggests, members of English-speaking communities all over the world. And although readability, as again the author states, is the prime concern, the neutrality of the English language has not been deployed to erase cultural differences and to create a homogenous third world literature. The different moorings of the stories continue to surface not just because the author has a minimum set of guidelines, retaining as she does culture-specific words, kinship terms and those related to the flora and fauna, but also because the syntax is sometimes quite specifically Bengali, and because certain recurrent motifs, themes, situations and certain modes of being emerge from specific historical and cultural contexts.

The stories in the volume occupy different ends of a spectrum. There are twelve stories dealing with the middle or the upper class, with individuals who sometimes cross continents, change lives to pick up somewhere again the threads of a life left behind as in Nabaneeta Dev Sen's "Proprietor", or encounter in a flash the radiance of a life lived outside the executive's office space as in Sunil Gangopadhyay's "A Dream Day". Conjugal relationships are explored in Manju Sarkar's "Alone, Together" and in Rahat Khan's "The Shape of Things" to work out the thematic of ennui and boredom, often with a pleasant turn of events at the end, or even as in Hasnat Abdul Hye's "Still Life" with a contemplation of the happiness that could have been there sensuously exemplified in the activities of two sparrows who build nests and set up a joyous home in the very room where bits of paper left lying tell the story of a sad and broken relationship. The bliss of conjugal life is also at the core of Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's fantasy entitled "Raft" where life is completely regulated by machines, where there is a ban on marriage and on prolonged cohabitation of men and women. On a different note the middle-class predicament is worked out through the prodigious burden imposed upon a child as his parents try to admit him to a good school in Suchitra Bhattacharya's "Rainbow Colours", through the detached mannerisms and the complex feelings of a young girl whose parents attempt to arrange a suitable match for her in Dibyendu Palit's "Wonderstory" and even through the story of a man whose obsession is to pick up conversation with girls over the telephone in Rashid Hyder's "Incognito." Each story is well-crafted and a few excel in their craftsmanship. The stories from Bangladesh in particular often weave the personal and the political in a very intricate manner.

There are a few stories that focus on individuals who are marked by difference, throwing open an area of contemplation outside the sphere of the everyday or the known – there is the story of the irrepressible Ranju, the boy living in a world of his own, who sprays blood all around as he spits delighted at the blood-bow instead of the rainbow that surrounds him in Debes Ray's story "Ranju's Blood"; of the poet in the family forced to confine himself to the attic as he cannot come to terms with the violence and greed around him, linking it as he does in his imagination with the picture of a war-torn country in "Irina's Picture" by Rizia Rahman; or of a person on a long sea-voyage being obsessed with a wonder-light and killing himself when the light is shattered in Atin Bandyopadhyay's story "Amazing Light".

Sometimes the stories depict other communities. In "Six Mini-buses for Aditi" by Sadhan Chattopadhyay one encounters the story of a young girl struggling for education against the backdrop of a not-so-remote but poor suburban area hemmed in by the subtle mechanisms of a grim politics, while in "Gangacharan's Champreng" by Debabrata Deb one again encounters a man who dreams of playing on the Champreng on a moonlit night while all around him there is dire poverty, violence and corruption unleashed by a bureaucratic machinery and an unjust social order. "Return, in the Moonlight" by Jyotiprakash Dutta is a story set in a forest land on a moonlit night in the presence of the dead and the living, while "Secret Life, Public Death" by Syed Shamsul Haq weaves stories within stories even as 'all over Jaleswari, the story trembles like water on a lotus leaf.' There the story is public property, woven out of rumours, gossip and dark secrets and however hidden the life of sin, ultimately it is the community to which one surrenders for judgment and truth.

There are several stories dealing with lives on the margins and beyond– there is, for instance a beautiful mother and daughter who live on the edge of the delta land outside society but not outside the reach of rapists, in Hasan Azizul Haq's "A Mother-Daughter World", and there are stories of those who are 'expendable', a new concept generated by a world-order mechanically geared to progress in Mahasweta Devi's "Jamunaboti's Mother", and again the story of a young boy turned 'terrorist' whose body goes unclaimed in Selina Hossain's "Spent". Then there are those other stories—sometimes probing the limits of experience, of writing, as in Showkat Ali's "A View of Famine" where we have a horrendous and stark image of a famine-struck human being who has killed his children, tasted blood and lives somewhere on the borderland between life and death, perhaps across the line of death.

Reading through the stories one becomes aware of the meaning of narratives in the public sphere—of the fact that they do bring into being new horizons that act towards the creation of more open and alternative societies. Stories addressing injustices and recording the struggle with injustice, forces rethinking, develops perception through a complex linking of form and content and allows the re-envisioning of a new beginning. In that context and given the fact that the stories are as well chosen, should one rethink the whole question of selection for an anthology? Most anthologies, including the present, select their material on the basis of their representative value with the focus on thematic diversity and formal experimentation. "To showcase the creative talent of representative contemporary Bengali short-story writers" is the goal of the anthology as the translator states. The question of purpose resurfaces if we think about the readers for whom the stories are being showcased—of the specific kinds of dialogue in which English speaking communities of the world need to be engaged with Bengali speaking communities. We are not simply writing back—we do not have to really, for we have been writing ever since and so, although it is important to represent diversities, it is time we also thought of other goals and purposes. What does it mean for instance to read of the dehumanizing experience of famine along with the emotional complications of a comfortable elite, the issue of rape of a mother and daughter on the outskirts of society along with problems related to the admission of a child in school? The weight of problems and of issues is terribly unequal. Perhaps one is not supposed to read them together. But if they exist side by side on the level of the imaginary they do so in reality as well and very different questions can emerge because of the juxtapositions.

The stories dealing with lives outside the boundaries of the middle class are often the ones that are more powerfully conceived and leave a lasting impression. In the course of the struggle of communities of people or even otherwise one comes across a portrayal of natural surroundings that engenders a sense of wonder and opens up spaces for new creative relationships with the community and the world. These are also places that usually provide the greatest stumbling block to translators, but in this text the so-called areas of untranslatability are its areas of strength. The translator has dealt with these areas in a very competent manner and that too not just in terms of the target language, but in terms of providing a space where one learns to listen, to perceive and to be a true host to the other.

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta

The Brainfever Bird by I. Allan Sealy by Picador, Pp. 360, Rs.425/-

Allan Sealy spent seven years to write his first novel *The Trotter-Nama*, an epic spanning seven generations of an Anglo-Indian family. It took him four years to find a publisher for the novel which is one of the best works of fiction written by an Indian in English, richly layered both in form and content. Though it got him a few awards—the Commonwealth Award for the best first book, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Crossword Book Award, but it never created a sensation on the literary scene. Since then he has published one travel book *From Yukon to Yucatan* and three novels, *The Hero, The Everest Hotel* and his latest *The Brainfever Bird*, the book under review.

The novel is a tale of two cities, Old Delhi and St. Petersburg. Old Delhi, formerly Shahjahanabad, stands on the river Yamuna "a shrunken, much-molested stream." The novelist adds,"In summer the river boils and you may cook on the city's red stone." The white city of St. Petersburg is a contrast of sorts. "St. Petersburg sits on a delta, and in winter the canals are covered in ice. Then the whole city glitters like a stranded iceberg in the moonlight." Sealy had visited the city in 1999 as what he terms "a literary tourist" and the impressions he carried back went into the book. He said in a recent interview that one has to visit a place in order to be able to write about it.

Lev Repin, one of the central characters of the novel comes from St. Petersburg to Delhi. He is out-of-work scientist in a post Cold War Russia "where physicians wash windows and engineers drive trains." He heads for India with a briefcase full of papers hoping to sell the knowhow of biological weapons to the Ministry of Defence. When he reaches Delhi he is robbed and barely manages to find a cheap hotel. Soon, his lodging problems are solved as he meets Maya, the incorrigible daughter of the Chief Commissioner of Police. Maya is independent, seemingly frivolous, justifies her name and lives in a barsati where she makes puppets. She is twenty years younger than the forty-five-year-old Lev who is married but these details do not disturb her unduly. Morgan Fitch, the Channel X anchorman with the famous pout(by which he is identified after his death) completes the triangle as he is in love with Maya. He has grown up loving Russia and Russian poets. Ironically he dies in Russia, pushed in icy cold water by Lev's son who does not know him. The reader might ask "Why?" but there is no answer. Many such intriguing situations find their way into the novel and the reader is expected to interpret them in his/her own way.

Understandably Maya and Lev's affair cannot have an "and they lived happily ever after" kind of ending. The distance between St. Petersburg and Delhi is more than just a physical one. Lev's secret service past catches up with him making him realize that Delhi is no longer safe. The day he is to leave for Russia, someone attacks Lev and throws acid on him. Maya and Morgan rush to the hospital but Lev has already left. Later Maya has Lev's daughter whom she names Masha, but they never meet again. The magical moments have come and gone. Lev's letter to Maya says it all. To quote from it, "Just before the winter there are a few days of clear, warm weather. So when I was young I had my summer and then again came this season, short short short. This you were to me. I do not know still what I was to you."

The Brainfever Bird can be read on many levels. The brainfever bird or the papeeha always sings of love though it is unrequited. The three main protagonists of the novel experience moments of love which are intense but not lasting. The message seems to be that love is the only way towards fulfillment at a time when violence has become a disruptive force everywhere and life has become almost an illusion.

Closely related to this is the theme of puppets and puppeteers. Characters seem to be remotely controlled. Maya the illusionist controls the puppets she has put together so lovingly and painstakingly—Babaji, Anarkali, Razia Sultana and the rest. She also controls the two men in her life who always do her bidding. And who controls her? The novelist seems to be the master puppeteer ultimately in control of the situation as well as the characters. The trope of the puppets and the puppeteer for human life and fate is not new but Sealy's use of it has a touch of innovation. The dust jacket calls it "a literary thriller bursting with life, illusion and wonder." This reviewer feels there is much more to the novel than that: it is a comment on the uncertainties that have crept into all aspects of life, mainly human relationships, in keeping with the chaos that has become part of human life today. The author tries to laugh off the insinuations that Maya is a very hard taskmaster, a perfectionist who would never cut corners. She emerges as a strong woman, one who does her own thing and brings up Masha independently. Much after one has finished reading the novel one remembers her, with her deepset eyes and unkempt hair....

Purabi Panwar

Shamsur Rahman: A Witness of His Times, Chief Editor Ajeet Cour, Executive Editor Pankaj Bhan, Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature, New Delhi, 2003, Rs.99/-

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The first-ever SAARC Literary award for Lifetime achievement goes to Shamsur Rahman of Bangladesh. The conferment was done at the Third SAARC Writers' Conference held in Dhaka during 22-24 March, 2001.The book under review is brought out by the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature with Ajeet Cour and Pankaj Bhan as Chief Editor and Executive Editor respectively. The book has two sections. The first contains, apart from a short piece by Shamsur Rahman on himself, twelve tributes written by eminent writers and artistes that include Kabir Chowdhury, Debesh Roy, Kaiser Haq, Gulzar , Sitakant Mahapatra, Manabendra Bandyopadhyay, Abu Hasan Shariar, Abhi Subedi, Zillur Rahman Siddiqui and Mofidul Hoque. The second section has forty-three poems of Shamsur Rahman beautifully translated by Kabir Chowdhury and Kaiser Haq. This output of only forty-three poems constitutes but a small portion of Rahman's total ouvre which by now exceeds sixty poetry titles. In fact there is perhaps a hidden feeling among many that he may have published a little too many titles. In this connection one may recall that the Bangla language poetry scenario offers just one more parallel in this respect in Shakti Chattopadhyay. That powerful poet who passed away a few years ago left behind an output of fifty-one collections of original poetry and fourteen volumes of translations.

While making this remark on the quantity one must hasten to add that this is not to doubt even a bit about the quality of poetry they have written.

Now, about Shamsur one may note the apt subtitle used by the editors of the volume: *A Witness of His Times*. Maybe that since history cast him in that role the poet had to rise to the occasion and couldn't let any moment in his national life go without leaving a trace in his poetry. And what a national life! An eighteen-year-old witnesses his country's Independence and Partition in 1947. In his adolescence he had already experienced bitter communal tensions and open riots between the two communities. The short-lived sense of national relief gets violently shaken in the language politics and tensions following the attempted imperious imposition of Urdu as the national language. There follows the language struggle culminating in the martyrdom of several youths on 21 February 1952. The phrase '*ekushe* February' has acquired a symbolic meaning signifying linguistic patriotism and the date is now marked by the UNESCO as the International Mother-tongue Day. Then follows the politics of the fifties and the sixties that centers round gradually increasing alienation from the central rulers of Pakistan and the period marks the birth of an unmistakable Bangla nationalism with a distinct sense of Bangla identity. This, of course, occasionally tends to get marred by the rise and assertion of an Islamic identity which is never at ease with the Bangla identity. The Bangla sense soon acquires more clearly enunciated secular nuances which again brings it into conflicting relations with the Islamic sense. The secular Bangla sense slowly turns itself into a powerful political force and ultimately leads to the tumultuous events of the early seventies that culminate in the declaration of independence from Pakistan, leading to the liberation war. The *muktijuddha* days are a decisive turning point in the history of these Bengali people of erstwhile East Pakistan. The liberation war gives birth to the new independent nation of Bangladesh. Shamsur Rahman, then in his early forties, was at the peak of his creative powers. The trials and tribulations of the fledgling nation find their voice in Rahman's poetry of the next three decades. That makes him a witness of his times.

The citation of the SAARC award reads: 'To know the great poet Shamsur Rahman is to know his people and the struggle of his people for the fundamental right of man for Freedom and Self-determination, particularly the right to use the language we hear from our mothers, lying in their laps and in their cradles, when they sing their lullabies to us.' The citation continues: 'To read Shamsur Rahman is to read Bangladesh.' This surely touches a chord in the readers of Bangla poetry on this side of the border too. This line would evoke personal memories of many of us of the turbulent days of the liberation war. The sonorous baritone of Devdulal Bandyopadhyay would give out in the late evenings on the Calcutta centre of All India Radio those famous lines of "Swadhinata Tumi," a poem by Shamsur Rahman in his collection *Bandi Shibir Theke* (From the Prison Camp). This book was available to Kolkata readers in an edition published here. That poem is included in the present volume in Kabir Chowdhury's translation as "Liberty, You are...," which begins with:

> Liberty, you are
> Tagore's ever-youthful poetry,
> his indestructible songs.
> Liberty, you are
> Kazi Nazrul Islam, that noble soul
> With his shock of wavy hair,
> Always aquiver with the ecstasy of creation.

It thus goes on defining liberty socially and culturally for the Bangla people, that is the people that speak the Bangla language. But for that it doesn't delink itself from the local landscape and culturescape. This is poignantly captured in the references to the 'bright assembly on the immortal Twenty-first of February/ at the foot of the Shaheed Minar,' or 'the heaving bosom of the vast Meghna in the rains, or the generous expanse of my father's soft prayer mat', (*swadhinata tumi pitar komal jaynamazer udar jamin*) or 'the red colour of mehdi on the tender palm of my sister.'

I am referring to this poem and these lines not to explore their aesthetic qualities. I take my cue from Ajeet Cour's tribute to the master: 'More than 50 collections of his poems have marked a distinct era which will be known as 'Shamsur Rahman era of Bangla literature' on both sides of the border. I now wish to make a point that is more socio-cultural and political than aesthetic. Shamsur Rahman is doubtless a doyen of Bangla poetry, but still it may not be exactly right to suggest that on both sides of the border we can truly think of a Shamsur Rahman era of Bangla literature. That would amount to thinking about literature primarily in terms of a language. Not unnatural. But difficulties arise due to the intervention of social and political forces. And here comes in the question of reading practices in practical terms. As I have already mentioned, the 'Liberty poem' was in fact a part of live reading/listening practice of many on this side of the border during the *muktijuddha* days, the collection *Bandi Shibir Theke* being freely available here. But the trend has not continued. And this holds true not just for a particular title by a particular author. The general picture here is that the readers of Bangla literature on West Bengal side are by and large not familiar with the writings on the other side of the border, a good number of specialist readers notwithstanding. The general readership here is largely unaware of what is happening there. Thus Bangladeshi literature in general hardly forms a part of our live reading practice.

I bring in this issue especially for the SAARC ambience of the present volume. There is an interesting asymmetry in the history of our reading practices that makes the issue still more sensitive. The reading practices in Bangladesh, as far as one can judge from this side of the border, seem to make them more naturally familiar with the literature produced in West Bengal. The common readers of Bangladesh are at least not unaware of the relative standing of Indian Bangla writers. In contrast, for an ordinary reader here, it is not unlikely that he cannot correctly spot even some of the major writers of Bangladesh. This asymmetry is perhaps due to many historical and socio-cultural reasons. Bangladeshi books are not very easily available here. Cultural exchanges are not too easy. It is extremely unfortunate that cultural and literary relations in practice between these two close linguistic neighbours do not match the emotive intensities of the two peoples.

This disjuncture in reading practices presents a tricky problem for the historiography of Bangla literature. Do. we have a unified history of this literature even in the post-1947 period? Or should we be reconciled to the idea of two different histories for this period? The answer must take into account the reading practices along with the way we look at our traditions. The asymmetric unfamiliarity presents a peculiar problem in that the shared sense of tradition also gets fractured. We need to unite, feel like uniting in a common tradition, but our aspirations remain unfulfilled. I cannot lay my hands on the books I should have cared for.

Now to come back to the volume itself. The short tributes are written by some of Rahman's perceptive readers from Bangladesh, India and Nepal. In addition, the volume contains a very short piece by Shamsur Rahman on himself. One would wish that it were a little longer and a little more substantial. I have recently read a charming autobiographical article by Rahman in a Bangla annual volume published in Kolkata. I wish the readers of this volume had access to that piece. Most of the other pieces try to capture this or that quality of Rahman's poetry. These are not exactly in the format of critical study. They point to different features of the man and his work. One thing clearly comes out from these short observations.

Shamsur Rahman has lived true to his times and has given voice to almost anything that has happened to his new struggling nation. Life in Rahman's Bangladesh was not easy. The vicissitudes of this life find a vibrant expression in Rahman's poetry. Kabir Chowdhury, his able translator, rightly remarks: 'Shamsur Rahman is among the most widely read poets of Bangladesh. A significant reason for his popularity lies in the fact that the poet with his alert mind and deep social awareness always promptly reacted to the various critical issues troubling the nation at different times and many readers not only saw in him an inspired chronicler of our times but also often detected in his verses the voice of the nation's conscience.'

To be a 'voice of the nation's conscience' may prove too burdensome for a poet. His 'personal space' there may stand him in good stead to give him protection from wastage and 'meaningless inanities'. Shamsur Rahman also has his 'Hidden Treasure', included in this volume in Kabir Chowdhury's translation. The opening lines of this poem are:

> These days everyone behaves with me in such a way
> That I feel sorely tempted
> To lie down on my bed,
> Turn my face away from the world
> And go to sleep for seventy-two hours at a stretch
> With my side-pillow clutched to my breast.

The translations included in this volume are highly readable and despite that celebrated elusiveness of translated poetry, the selection gives a fair idea of the kind of poetry Rahman writes. There can be no reasonable quarrelling with the selection itself. Such projects of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature are welcome.

Sourin Bhattacharya

Love Besieged by Charles Pearce, edited by Ralph Crane, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, Rs.395/-

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In the history of British Empire, the revolt of 1857 was a watershed in more than one sense. While the passing of the authority from the British East India Company to the Crown created a new and undoubtedly stronger structure of governance, the Indian defeat came to confirm in British minds, their sense of superiority. The rebels were soon likened to a peculiar fictional species in imperial literature, immortalised in Kipling's phrase, 'half-devil, half-child'. Superiority taken for granted, a context in which the British public became more acutely concerned about happenings in India, produced a large variety of fictions, written by people, some of whom might not have had any direct knowledge about India. They imagined India as a space where the 'Whites' and the 'Natives' clashed, which was to end inevitably in the acceptance of defeat by the natives.

Literary representatives or such contrasting racial types dominated what is known as 'colonial literature'. Yet this colonial literature also imagined an exclusive space for the whites to which the entry of the natives were permanently barred and in this imagining the white women appeared as a kind of an esoteric figure, who were few in number and therefore were 'specious' for the 'virile' English menfolk craving for feminine company. As rightly pointed out by Ralph Crane, the editor of the book, in his analysis of the characterisation of Jane Atherton, the new-comer English lady at the outbreak of the mutiny: 'She is the white virginal heroine who gives the besieged British (specially Hawke) a cause to fight for and (in the case of Dr. Lennard) a reason to die'. (Introduction - p-xviii). This typical format of characterisation of British ladies in the context of colonial India repeats itself in the film *Heat and Dust* or in the portrayal of the key character 'Ruth' in Shyam Benegal's film—*Junoon*.

In this book, the portrayal of different characters has been done in two ways. The author has enlivened some historical characters with such analytical detail which takes the book beyond the category of a novel. This is seen in the characterisation of Sir Henry Havelock —the sixty-two-year-old priest, who also gave leadership to the British resistance in Lucknow. This historical episode described in the narrative reminds us of the saga of British generosity and bravery of the late 19th century—which we get to see in numerous contemporary literature of the colonial period. The author epitomises the transition from a 'Christian soldier' to the 'militaristic hero' of the British cultural history. The manner in which Sir Henry met with his death — even in his last minutes he gives the necessary instructions to Major Bank with a stoic acceptance of the fatality — his unfaltered sense of duty and responsibility filled the cornered and besieged Englishmen with the typical Victorian valour. His last words 'No surrender! Let everyman die at his post, but never make terms!' does not fail to inspire admiration not only in the British but it also appeals to Indian sentiment. While describing these events, the role of Charles Pearce almost transcends from that of a novelist to an historian's. *Love Besieged* does not only linger in a world of fantasy like any ordinary novel; it records the incidents of the siege of Lucknow with sufficient accuracy where historical characters like Nana Saheb and Azimullah Khan find their fitting place.

The fiction's characters harmonise very effectively with the historical facts. Following the mutiny, the British became more and more committed to the protection of their home and their women from the dangerous contaminants of outside spaces. We see a reflection of this sentiment within the character of Jack Hawke. During this period, the sense of British masculinity almost underwent a metamorphosis to the late Victorian; 'it stood for Neo-Spartan virility as exemplied by Stoicism, hardiness and endurance' [*Manliness and Morality : Middle-class Masculinity in Britain and America* (1800-1940) ed. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, Manchester UK, 1987]

In 1864, G.O. Trevelyan remarks in his book, *The Competitionwallah*, that 'the mutiny continues to remind us that we are an imperial power holding our own on a conquered soil by dint of valour and foresight,' although we see that the commitments were made contrary to this dogma. While addressing a meeting of all chiefs on 22nd December 1856, the Begum of Oudh remarked: 'Great things were promised from the all-powerful Delhi and my heart used to be gladdened by the communications I used to receive from that city....Nana has been vanquished and Lucknow is endangered' (*Carnegy's Intelligence,* Foreign Department, Secret Branch 26th Feb. 1858 No. 228). With reference to the above, it may be interpreted that the mutiny in Oudh took such a tremendous form because the people of Awadh thought they were fighting a just and legitimate war. In June 1858, Lord Canning observed while addressing the Secret Committee to the Court of Directors 'The rising against our authority in Oudh has been general, almost universal.'

When one looks at the depiction of characters like Azimullah Khan or Mrs. Ross by the author, one tends to believe that Azimullah Khan was nothing short of the Devil himself with his practise of vices like debauchery and dishonesty. However, the activities of Azimullah Khan as recorded in the history of contemporary period is not compatible with such characterisation. Mrs. Ross has been made to appear more engrossed in vengeance than in love, her whole conscience engulfed with the poison of envy. The portrayal of this character throughout the book reminds us of the key character of the book entitled *She* by H. Rider Haggard, published in 1887. 'She—who must be obeyed. The queen cured Leo of a fever and she herself had murdered Kallikrates for refusing her his love.' Mrs. Ross fails to uphold her superiority due to the racial difference of her origins and the more passionate, angry or jealous she becomes, the more Indian she appears, almost identifying the virtue of rationality to be an unique British feature. The way she is made to manipulate the infatuation of Lieutenant Hilton to establish contact with Azimullah Khan is a typical feature of the colonial influences upon the literature of that period. Her love-hate relationship with Hawke, and the sequences of her coincidental meetings with Jane, surpasses the domain of the dramatic to non-realistic occurrences. Later on, the killing of Azimullah Khan by using traditional 'Thugee' techniques bolsters the author's concept of her alleged racial impurity.

In spite of these one-sided views, the narrative is informative and keeps the reader involved. In certain parts of the book, the detailed description of arms and warfare may seem a bit monotonous and obstructing, deterring the natural flow of the narrative to some extent. Pearce's is an almost black and white narrative. While aspects like masculinity, femininity, politics and emotion got prominence, history and romance replete with general and personal sentiments find due place in this well-composed book which accounts for its success.

One has to congratulate the publishers for reprinting the book at the onset of the 21st Century thus making us aware of the typical British expression of ignorance blended with contempt towards the Indians prevalent about a hundred years ago (the book was first published in 1911), which resulted in the mutiny of 1857.

Kanchana Mukhopadhyay

Cross and Creation: An Anthology of Poems by Pashupati Jha, Prestige Books, New Delhi, 2003, Rs.150/-
Protest Poems by A.N. Dwivedi,Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2002, Rs.140/- (hardback), Rs.80/- (flexiback).

Jha parodiés Auden when he portrays the mind's transformation at the moment of creative quest. He writes, "And when if we have/ a heart that lives a little/poetry makes a lot to happen." ("Poetry makes a lot to happen"). Auden had said, "for poetry makes nothing happen/it survives in the valley of saying." ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats: — Part II). Notably however, while Auden lapses into gloom, Jha strikes a note of optimism. To him poetry is evoked by a fascinating experience, ringing a sonorous music, "reflecting the sun in a colourful rainbow."

For a substantial part, Jha turns to poetry as the subject of his poems, in allusion and direct statement. The illustrative instances are; "Like a camel…I was all poetry again" ("Reviving Touch"), "Thought and emotion impatient to be printed" ("That Rare Moment"), "Outside world is suddenly bereft of Muse" ("Muse's Abode") and "Poetry has a difficult birth" ("The Birth"). The poet wonders if the past repeats itself upon our life even as in parts and therefore looks to crucifixion to draw solace in the moment of hurt. The motif has a precedence in an early poem, "Civilization: A Progress Report" which is a photo record of modern life:

> And somewhere, in the distance
> Christ bleeds again, and again.

Yet the apologetic note prefaced in the appeal, "Give Poetry a Chance" makes a sad reading. The poet is a highly egoistic creature. He would seldom pray to be heard even as he parades himself as a social victim. Jha says, "Please give poetry a chance to ennoble your mind and spirit, its impact may be slow but certain." For sure, it is not any mercy or pity but the gravitation of appeal that would pull the readers to poetry.

To Jha's credo, poetry is a serious vocation. He is never in a hurry and quite patiently lets his experience gestate and shape into ripe rhetoric before utterance. He attempts a profound organization of his experience and meditates over his thought rather than being swept away in the tide of emotion. He intimates:

> There is no easy
> outlet for me,
> my grief does not
> melt into tary tears—
> flowing down the cheeks
> in silent streams.
>
> ("No Romantic Agony This")

The Audenesque feature is more conspicuous in the poems of A.N. Dwivedi who has extensively written on the twentieth century English and Indo-English poets. Like Auden, Dwivedi too is the poet of common objects and events around him. Even as his work emerges as light verse, his lines call for compulsive reading for their striking phrases bustling with an unusual force. In his typical epigrammatic style, he gives us close-ups of common existence and the degeneration of social and moral values. The spectacle of human events as drawn by him refuses to come to terms with poetic solemnity for which he calls his verses 'protest poems'

> Officials often become decent 'n' calm
> when the public readily greases their palm.
> Everyone is in a rat-race today
> Lest they lag behind in life's fray.
> ("Today's Rat Race")

The spectrum of Dwivedi's wide subjects may be reckoned from the varied titles of the poems. These relate to communal riots, politicians, tailors, slum-dwellers, rickshawallahs, shoe-makers, litigation, bribery, policeman, train schedule, multinationals, fornication etc. The volume has thirtyseven poems, some of which are from earlier collections. Dwivedi's mandate is the social and political issues which he handles deftly with a topical urgency. He focusses upon the malaise of communal strife which is 'wedging a ruinous rift between brother 'n' brother.' He is perturbed how the 'politicians of all hues… give a go ahead nod to the goons 'n' gangsters'. The corruption and crime are being further bred by the multinationals:

> Adulteration is the antonym
> of 'purity' 'n' the synonym
> of 'multinationals,' spreading
> its tentacles far 'n' wide
> in the human world.
> ("Multinationals")

The poet protests against all that goes against the interest of the nation and the society. He is ill at ease at the nefarious atmosphere in all walks of life in the country. The crucial matters of the country are at stake in the hands of the brokers and agents. The whole phenomenon is so obnoxious that the poet acknowledges this despair:

> The poet knows, his simple thought
> will not overturn that applecart
> of an indifferent government.
> Can anyone quench its thirst?
> ("Dearness Allowance")

Manohar Bandopadhyay

Just the Facts, Madamji by Sharmila Kantha, Indialog Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi. Rs. 195

When I started reading Sharmila Kantha's debut novel *Just the facts, Madamji,* I was expecting it to be the usual run of the mill whodunit novel in which a smart-alecky detective would conjure clues out of nowhere, solve unsolvable riddles, decipher intricate codes and finally collar the criminal. To my amazement I have found that the 268page novel is very little about detective work; it is more about contemporary culture and offers penetrative insights into the life of a typical middle class city-dweller. Written in a light, comic style, the book is easy to read. Nothing is too serious—even the most disastrous events get described in a lighthearted manner.

The main protagonist is the financially strapped private investigator, too serious to be a bumbling detective of the Peter Sellers type and too flippant to be a real detective of the Sherlock Holmes kind. In fact he is just a normal middle class man, the kind that makes bank employees—he is in fact a bank employee when he is not chasing criminals, grilling suspects or looking for clues. His only qualification for the job of a PI is (in his own words): "I had undergone-two months of karate lessons when I was a teenager and a decade-and-a-half of reading crime fiction." That in the end he is able to solve the mystery and outfox the criminal is more out of serendipity rather than anything else.

The story begins with the private investigator accepting an investigation job from one Mrs. Kumar, who happens to be a close relative of the murdered woman Mrs. Mehrotra, the wife of a senior bureaucrat who had accumulated wealth far beyond his means. All the murdered woman's relatives are eager to pounce on her wealth. But Mrs. Kumar is convinced that there exists a will in which Mrs. Mehrotra has left everything for her. She hires the private investigator to find the will, which could bring her immense wealth. When the PI asks whether he should try to find Mrs. Mehrotra's murderer as well, along with the will, she bluntly retorts, 'Murderer-shurderer! That is nothing to do with us. The police are looking....' Death of one family member is for other family members just a chance to get rich. Well, so much for family loyalty. During the course of his investigations the PI encounters people from different strata of society and rips off their masks to bring to light their hypocrisies and idiosyncrasies. An undercurrent of cynicism pervades the book. It seems as if all the characters are fake and it is the PI's job to expose them all. Through her characters, Sharmila Kantha does a fine job of portraying the hollowness of modern life.

Mandy Kaur happens to be the PI's love angle. She is a meat-eating, Punjabi-speaking Sikh while the PI is a conservative Brahmin from the south of the Aravallis. He likes old Hindi film songs and dairy milk chocolates while she likes loud chartered-bus music and homemade pinni. But they are able to overcome the barriers of caste and taste and start meeting occasionally in public parks where they talk and hold hands. The PI often dreams of kissing Mandy, but till the very end, is unable to muster courage to do that. Another finely etched character is Mona Kapoor, a niece of the murdered woman. In the mind of the PI, a Hindi film buff, she is Mona Darling. She invites the PI to fancy parties and flirts with him.

The PI's thoughts are at times conveyed in the book by means of extracts from film songs. When he is thinking of Mandy the following song plays in his mind:

Pyar kiya to darna kya,
Jab pyar kiya to darna kya,
Pyar kiya koi chori nahi ki,
Chhup-chhup aahein bharna kya...

and when he is plying his scooter in the sweltering noon sun he contemplates:

Sar jo tera chakraye,
Yaa dil dooba jaaye,
Aaja pyaare, paas hamare,
Kahe ghabraye, kahe ghabraye...

The idea of penning lines from Hindi songs to portray mood is quite fresh and adds to the novel's appeal. Part of the credit must go to the Indian musical maestros who have crafted a song for every mood. So what happens in the end? The PI manages to get to the bottom of the whole mystery and nails the murderer. It is an unspoken rule that a detective novel should always finish with a surprise revelation. Sharmila Kantha tries her best to achieve that, her usual suspects are in the end found innocent and the culprit turns out to be the guy whom no one suspects. When the indomitable PI finally catches the unlikely criminal this is how he congratulates himself:

> I had to pull over to the kerb to give vent to my excitement. I stamped my feet in joy. I banged my fists on the scooter handlebars. I whooped in exultation. Yes, yes, yes, I did it! Yes, yes, yes!!! Hell!!

> I did it, I did it!! I solved the crime! Wow, I was brilliant! Brilliant!! Hahahaha!!

Such lighthearted lines make the book a delight to read. But the plot is thin and there is little beyond those funny lines. Sharmila Kantha's novel is one of those books that you may enjoy while reading, but which will disappear from memory the moment the last page is turned.

Anoop Verma

Our Contributors

Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914): One of the desciples of Mirza Galib, Hali is best known for his epic poem, "Musaddas Madd-o-Jazr-e-Islam". His other literary achievements include a biography of Galib and one of the earliest texts in Urdu literary criciticism, "Muqaddama-e-Sher-o-Shayari".

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Narasimha Swamy, K.S. *"K.S.Na"* **(1915-2003)** Eminent Kannada poet; authored more than 24 collections of poetry; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, Kumaran Asan Award, Masti Venkatesa Iyengar Literary Award etc. and Hony. D. Litt. by Bangalore University; was a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi. Address of legal heir: No.467, 'Kavyashri,' II Block, Banashankari III Stage, III Phase, Bangalore 560 085.

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Ray, Niharranjan (1903-1981) Scholar, art-critic, historian and writer both in English and Bengali; his *Rabindra Sahityer Bhumika* (an introduction to Rabindranath's literature) and *Bangalir Itihas: Adi Parba*, for which he received the Rabindra Award, are important works in Bengali; recipient of several awards in India and abroad including *Padmabhushan* and Sahtiya Akademi Award.

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Dear Reader,

We begin this issue by sharing with you a very reassuring news from Kolkata, the kind which lifts up the spirit. There is a Bengali poet named Shambhu Rakshit who has been writing poetry for the last 40 years and publishing a little magazine out of sheer love and commitment. He courted arrest by joining the protest against the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi. Of late, he has been in extremely indigent circumstances, facing an acute housing problem and needing urgent treatment for deteriorating health conditions. When things reached a crisis point, 40 painters of Kolkata came forward to help him. They donated one painting each for a special exhibition and the fund raised by selling the paintings was handed over to the poet. At the inauguration of the exhibition, senior poets like Sankha Ghosh, Bhumendra Guha and others were also present. As the painters who donated their paintings included stalwarts like Paritosh Sen, Jogen Choudhury, Robin Mandal et al, one is sure that the exhibition yielded a sizeable amount which will reasonably alleviate the poverty of the poet. But what is more important here is the attitude of camaraderie among the poets and painters of Bengal. Poetry and painting are often complimentary; poets and painters of Bengal have always derived inspiration from each other. There is a tradition of such bonding. The illustrious Tagores of Jorasanko, almost all of them, pursued both the disciplines simultaneously. In the later period, the friendship between Jamini Roy and Bishnu De was legendary, the latter also having extensively written on Jamini Roy's art. Many artists including Satyajit Ray and Purnendu Patrea used to design gratis the covers of poetry books of young poets. The recent happening centering Shambhu Rakshit thus upholds a very healthy tradition.

I have recently come across a book published by K.K. Birla Foundation, called *Saraswati Samman* (1991-2000). Elegantly produced, this bilingual volume in English (on the left-hand page) and Hindi (on the right-hand page) contains detailed information with regard to all the Saraswati Samman winners during the last decade, beginning with the inaugural award of 1991. Apart from the customary welcome addresses, introductory speeches, chief guests' addresses and the acceptance speeches given in each award function, it contains a literary profile of the awarded author, a review article on the award-winning title and a bibliography of the awarded author's works. The last three items are immensely valuable when we consider the fact that the authors covered are such luminaries of Indian literature like Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Ramakant Rath, Vijay Tendulkar, Harbhajan Singh, N. Balamani Amma, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, Manubhai Pancholi 'Darshak', Sankha Ghosh, Inidra Parthasarathy and Manoj Das. In the introductory chapter, Bhabotosh Dutta's article "Judging a Literary Work" lays bare the intricate but meticulous, articulate but objective, methodology involved in picking out an outstanding work from so many languages, while K. Satchidanandan's informed and insightful survey of Indian literature produced in the last quarter of the twentieth century brings out the process of 'modernisation' and 'democratisation' of our literature during these years, thus placing the Samman-winning authors in proper perspective. The volume should prove very handy for anyone researching on these great writers without having direct access to the primary source of their original languages.

The alliance of politics, journalism and literature once produced some of the finest minds in the history of Indian speculative thought. Of course, by politics here I do not mean the career politics or professional politics of today, but politics of some commitment; journalism here does not connote the allpervading unethical sensationalism of today, but the serious mission of a *Compass*, *Frontier* or *Mainstream*; and literature implies not the consumerised by-products of media explosion but serious reflection on man and morals and society. Perhaps one of the last members of this endangered species was Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, who would have turned eighty this April had he been alive today. On the occasion of his eightieth birth anniversary we present to our readers a talk given by him in Sahitya Akademi's 'Meet the Author' programme, a short story by him and an article on him – all under the 'Masters' section.

In his acceptance speech at the Jnanpith Award presentation ceremony, he said, "I have always felt at one with rebels, wherever they are, because like the artist they want to reform the chaotic world by imposing on it a form of material unity." As a freedom fighter and devout follower of Ram Manohar Lohia, Birendra Kumar was committed to the idea of the Third World and looked beyond the atom bomb and the Bengal famine. But, after Independence, when the dream of justice and equality failed to materialize, he, like others of his persuasion, naturally felt disillusioned. Almost all their gods seemed to have failed them. In this confusion, some of the comrades-in-pen tried to imbibe the vision of spiritual revolution; others sought the total but degraded reality; while still others withdrew into the solitary recesses of the self. But Birendra Kumar was one of the very few who decided to confront and sort out the hideous chaos. That relentless struggle was on till he breathed his last.

I once asked him whether his political belief has never clashed with his literary pursuit. In reply, he murmured that it is a question of integration. Politics has its own influence on life, which literature must take into account. But one has to remain aware of the fact that politics has its limitations too, and life has other sides. He had no patience for creeds like art for arts' sake: "You may be a worshipper of beauty for beauty's sake, but it leads you nowhere unless you aspire to recreate forms on the basis of reality, on the basis of truth." And the writer "has to be just, otherwise he misses the total human scene."

His infectious smile and mild manners did not always reveal the firmness with which he adhered to his cherished values. Once he refused to participate in a poetry broadcast from the Delhi Station of All India Radio, because an overcautious official asked him to replace a poem called "Naganir Chithi"(Letter from a Naga Woman). The officer wanted to play it safe in view of the then rampaging Naga insurgency. But Birendra Kumar would rather cancel the programme than be dictated by the bureaucracy.

Although better known as a novelist, Birendra Kumar's first love was poetry and he would always yearn to go back to it. In conversation, however, I always found him rather diffident about his own poetry. And yet, his last collection *Sandhyaswar* abounds in such haunting lines:

> I feel guilty, helpless, hurt…
> The unknown beggar
> Does not know me
> But I know her.
> She is my shame.

The ever-modest Birendra Kumar begins the speech, "A Moment of Self-Examine" which we publish in this issue, thus: "I think it was an English poet Hugh Macdiarmid who said: an unexamined life is not worth living. I constantly examine my life and find it not worth remembering." Few will agree.

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

The World According to V.K.N.

E.V. Ramakrishnan

V.K.N. whose full name is V. K. Narayanan Kutty Nair (1932-2004) defies easy categorization. Despite being widely recognized as a major writer of Malayalam, there is hardly any serious critical writing on him in the language. Few contemporary Malayalam writers of fiction can equal him in the creative use of language. That has also discouraged translators from taking up his works.

V.K.N. spent about a decade in Delhi as a journalist. Before that he was an employee in the government. To be more precise, he worked in the 'Devaswam Board' of Kerala which dealt with the temples. It is difficult to imagine two worlds more disparate in content. V.K.N. has been exposed to the two solid 'leisurely' classes in the twentieth century—the rural feudal lords and the metropolitan bourgeois. He was quick to discover that our ruling elites came from these social strata. The felicity with which he straddles these worlds of contradictions and paradoxies explains his compulsive need to use a variety of strategies that range from irony and satire to parody and pastiche. To describe him as a humorist may not do justice to his prodigious inventiveness. It is true that he can be savagely satirical like Sanjayan (who was a great writer of prose) and profoundly and irreverently irrational like Vaikkom Muhammed Basheer. But V.K.N. has internalized and transcended their traditions to shape a language of his own. Hegel's observation that form is 'nothing but the transformation of content into form' and content is nothing but 'the transformation of form into content' can be relevant to any reading of V.K.N. Here there is no content which is inseparable from its form.

To gain an entry into V.K.N's fictional world we need to convert ourselves into his ways of seeing. The story is not so much in the episode

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Excerpted from the Introduction to a forthcoming collection of V.K.N's stories published by Sahitya Akademi.

as in the manner of narration. Two of his stories viz. "Hanuman in Hamburg" and "The Bird Messenger" both of which happen to be about Kathakali artists may help us understand his narrative perspective. The Kathakali artist who is used to the liquor brewed in the village imbibes a bottle of Polish vodka of 1850 vintage while on a cultural tour of Europe, only to pass out instantly. Finally he is physically carried and displayed on the stage. What saves the day is the awe-inspiring resplendent make-up of Hanuman, the role he was to play. The audience is relieved to know that he was asleep. In the other story, the Kathakali actor helps himself liberally to the free hospitality aboard a flight. While enacting a piece for the benefit of a fellow passenger who happens to be a white lady, our artist walks out into the sky through the emergency exit and flies ahead of the aircraft. The lady's husband wryly comments : "Alcohol, too, is aviation fuel, my dear." Such negations of narrational gravity are very common in V.K.N. When Sonnyboy Kishen enters his father's hardware shop disguised as a cowboy and aims his pistol at his father Mool Chand's temple, his father calmly says : "Easy, you fool. The gun might go off."

These stories allow us to see the semiotics of V.K.N.'s fiction more clearly. Kathakali artists, legendary for their talent, are also known for their addiction to liquor. It is this popular perspective that helps V.K.N. to bring the elitist art of Kathakali down from its pedestal. If we look closely there is a foreigner in each of these stories mentioned above. Kishen, of course, is only a native disguised as a cowboy. These stories stage East-West encounters in different theatrical situations. The pomp and pageantry of Kathakali can only be rivalled by the spectacular Hollywood western. Both have a penchant for celebrating the heroic and the masculine. Behind their respective illusory worlds is the reality of their ideological affiliations. When the metropolitan capitalist meets the feudal snob in the deliberately exaggerated stylized movements of masked, costumed figures, they reveal. What they are—mere projections of a set of attitudes, assumptions, habits and manners. In V.K.N. stories, words reveal their meaning through their accents because they partake of the performative logic which, in the first place, occasions them. It is the undercurrent of the absurd, the deliberate rejection of the real in the above stories that helps us grasp the ideological component as part of the content.

A typical V.K.N. story begins as an encounter but soon develops into a contest or even a combat. V.K.N. uses dialogue almost in every story as the mode of narration. As mentioned above, it is through dialogues that he stages the story. The element of play is central to this performative structure. The word play reflects the power play at a deeper level because the real contest is between two mutually irreconcilable ideological positions. The most well-known character of V.K.N. is Payyan (which literally means 'a lad' or 'a boy') who never misses a chance to challenge and vanquish the opponent. These verbal duels which sparkle with wit and hilarity, use aggressiveness as a strategy. Here it should be remembered that Payyan is not a character in the real sense but a mode of visualizing reality. Payyan is the feudal arrogance superimposed on the metropolitan extravagance. In other words, Payyan is a transaction between two structures of power, and can be revealed only in a situation of combat or contest. Payyan ignites the ideological content of daily lives to reveal himself in a flash. Payyan is an 'effect' of the discourse of contest and combat V.K.N. employs.

In the novella *The Week,* Tom takes over the role of the combatant and dumbfounds Payyan. Tom Varghese who lands in Delhi on his way to the U.S. has only a vocabulary of thirty-three words in English, 'almost a word a year for his 36 years.' But that never inhibits him from taking on his opponents. Tom is to the point when he speaks to the Russian embassy official in charge of publications :

"See you again," Isky said rising.

"No see," said Tom, "give books to Payyan or I go to Americans."

That knocked the whitelander over.

"Please don't do that", he said, "we'll push the deal somehow."

"You thief now", Tom said, "say America, and you afraid. No trick on Tom, see?"

"Call it a deal then," said Boccaneesky.

Tom bullies his way through business deals and bargains. When he meets the attache at American embassy he invokes the Russain's name to extract a better deal. Tom is no caricature created out of worn-out mannerisms and cliches. Behind his face is the mask of an amoral, cynical, self-indulgent, manipulative businessman who is absolutely sure of himself. Tom puts his philosophy succinctly when he says : "Me want conduct, enjoy, enjoy, conduct." His aggressive self-confidence is symptomatic of a monologic world-view which does not recognize other view-points. Tom is a publisher who is deeply sceptical of writings in general and literature in particular.

In the portrayal of phenomena like Tom the businessman, Kishen the cowboy, Chathans the down-trodden peasant and Salwan the banker-cum-newspaper tycoon, V.K.N. unerringly focuses on the predatory element in the contemporary Indian society. There is an unending foodchain of victims where the lesser one is eaten by the bigger one. Payyan's game of one upmanship is a strategy for survival in the wild jungle of power games. In V.K.N.'s fictional works, food is a central metaphor. Both the feudal and bourgeois societies survive on the surplus they have easy access to. The feast or the party is an occasion for the flaunting of wealth and power. Payyan sums up Lord Salwan's action plan for him : "We'll spend any amount of money to secure all the money we want and more." Conspicuous consumption is invoked repeatedly in the ceremonies of eating and drinking, in the exhibition of expensive clothes, foreign perfumes and cars, carpetted rooms and affluent life styles. They add up to a willed assertion of power and the search for ways to sustain that power. The constant word-play in V.K.N. reveals as well as conceals the power-play people are engaged in. The world according to V.K.N. is a race field where everyone tries to outwit everyone else.

V.K.N.'s deep distrust of the category called 'the literary' needs to be noted. His stories are replete with allusions to classical, popular and 'high-brow' literatures. In "Drip-Drop" which is about the politics of water (water-tap, in fact) in a small village, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Kautilya and Ogden Nash are alluded to in a space of a few sentences. In "Syndicate", there is a sentence that captures the tone of the entire narrative : "Payyan assured her of his tryst with her destiny later in the day and drove to the castle." In "Drip-Drop" we come across the following sentence : "Between them, they conducted a Dikshitar sonata." Through a series of Freudian slips, a metonimic model of an alternative reality is revealed. This is V.K.N.'s way of carnivalizing the narrative to de-centre the real world. It is important to remember that V.K.N. is not accessible to a 'realistic' reading. The details of a feast or a party are meant to carnivalize the oppressive power structure which, in the final reckoning, is firmly in place.

In his carnivalized narration V.K.N. removes language from its fixed orbits of meaning. This destabilizes the equilibrium of received notions about reality which we substitute for 'reality.' V.K.N.'s fiction aims to disrupt the regime of meanings which passes for 'common sense.' Our common sense is never subjected to review or criticism as it serves as our tool for analysis and judgement. V.K.N.'s discourse is double-voiced as it contains the 'common sense' view of the world along with its criticism. Payyan is an effect of this double-voiced discourse which simultaneously moves along two planes—that of everyday world as well as its critique. The function of this discourse is to undermine the authority of any one particular hegemonic structure of power. In "Drip-Drop" there is a long interior monologue that belongs to Chathans where Nehru's rhetorical flourishes blend with Marxian revolutionary statements to produce a curious intertextual effect. In this operation (which we described above as 'carnivalization' of language) autonomy is denied to both Nehruvian and Marxian world-views. They are taken out of their customary domains of sanctity and deployed in the everyday world of contradictions. In the process, V.K.N. manages to alert us to another order of reality. What he discovers for us is our own complicity in the creation of categories that deny us self-knowledge.

❑

E.V. Ramakrishnan / 11

Annachi Strikes

V.K.N.

The secretary hushed up the incident by gifting Chathans a crisp ten rupee note next evening. He also promised the farmhand that in future he would not allow a grain of rice to move out of the village without involving Chathans in the deal. The storm spent itself for the movement.

"Now", the secretary said, "the district committee of the party has directed us to look into the wage structure in Annachi's match factory."

"I see", Chathans said, "when are we to begin the exercise?"

"Right away."

The match factory stood on the banks of the river that ran through the village. It was established with the blessings of the previous government which was rightist in character, composed as it was of capitalists, black magicians, priests and other reactionaries. Annachi, the proprietor, who hailed from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu acted the character role in the show along with eleven labourers —all local; seven males and the rest virgins. The men were paid three rupees a day and the virgins, two. Annachi lived alone in the premises reading *Kamba Ramayana* and Tamil dailies in his spare time.

"This country is essentially agrarian and I don't think the party is right in asking us to mobilise industrial labour as storm troopers to pull off the revolution", Chathans said.

"Who are you to sit in judgement over the collective wisdom of the party?" asked the secretary.

"This shows the middle-class character of the party leadership."

"Will you make it a little more clear?"

"The party is controlled by middle-class land owners. They have fixed the minimum wage for farm labour, but nobody pays it including the party bosses. Look at Tandar, for instance. And now they are organising the industrial labour to keep the farm hands at bay."

"Your thinking is confused."

"Not at all."

"So you don't believe in the new line of the party?"

"I believe in all sorts of lines and angles."

"What do you mean?"

"What does it matter which line one follows or deviates from so long as nothing is going to happen in this country?"

"You are disoriented. Are you falling in line with this particular line or not?"

"Of course, I do. It is a pleasure to be a witness to all the stupid things the party does."

"Enough of the heresy. Come, let us confront the comrades on their way back from work."

They met the militant eleven midway on the road. Elshan, the foreman, was in front.

The line halted as the first secretary and Chathans closed in.

"Ah, comrades," Elshan said.

"We are coming to meet you," The secretary said.

"Anything?"

"Yes," the secretary said, looking the force individually till his eyes rested on one of the virgins in her early twenties. She looked a born flirt. The secretary wondered where in the world she acquired such long-lashed eyes, lovely lips, a narrow hip and challenging breasts. The rest of her tribe did not at all look virgin. He asked them to introduce themselves by name and when her turn came the beauty lisped: "Neena Menon."

"That is a fine name," the secretary said. "Is this your maiden job?"

"No," Neena Menon said. "I was in the films."

"Where?"

"In Bombay."

"I was wondering, you know. The face is familiar and I have seen all your films."

Neena Menon was shy and said, avoiding the secretary's eyes: "It has been my privilege to watch you too, comrade secretary, staring at me in so many silver screens of cinema houses throughout the country."

"You thrill me. What were the wages of your sin in Bombay?"

"Ten plus ten."

"That means...."

"A million rupees in black and another million by crossed cheque for each film."

(Five rupees a shot, said the computer in Chathans' brain evaluating Neena, limb by limb.)

"How much does Annachi pay you?" the secretary asked.

"Two rupees a day."

"Why did you quit films?"

"I was bored and wanted a change."

"How's the work at Annachi's?"

"Not bad. At least one doesn't have to face the camera."

"How much does he pay a he-man like you?" the secretary asked Elshan.

"Three rupees."

"Your forefathers came from Ezhathu Nadu, I presume?" Chathans asked Elshan.

"No," Elshan said, "the people who came from that place are called Ezhavas. They are lower than us in the caste hierarchy. We come from Ezhimalai and are almost equal to the Nairs in caste and status."

Fine, fine, Chathans thought. So Elshan's revolution is to become a Nair. One hell of a goddamn country this.

The secretary said, "Under the impartial rule of our party weighted in favour of the working class, the minimum wage of a male farm hand has been fixed at six meassures of paddy and that of a virgin, at four. Computing at 60 paise a meassure this would come to Rs.3.60 and Rs.2.40. You should also get on par."

"We would be thankful to Annachi if he would pay us that much."

"Nobody should be thankful to anybody in the matter of class struggle," the secretary said. "Fair wages are your birthright. What do you say Neena?"

"That is so, comrade."

"Are you paid bonus?"

"No."

"Won't you have some?"

"It would be most welcome."

"Follow us. Let us sort this out with Annachi."

"It is late now," said Elshan.

"Later the better. Come along."

"I am not going with you." Neena Menon said. "Annachi will be cross with me."

"Are you coming or am I going to lift you bodily?" Chathans said menacingly. "It will be rough handling, I warn you."

"Don't be cross with us, comrade," Elshan said.

"Right about turn," Chathans said.

Back they went to Annachi, in single file, slow motion.

The Dravidian was reclining in an easy chair in the front room of the factory building reading a Tamil daily to the music of the river. He was black, middle-aged and stocky. A thick, gold chain glistened on his chest. He had tucked his dhoti to the left side of his waist. A leftist, Chathans thought. And an extremist if he would stretch the dhoti a bit more to the left.

Elshan coughed respectfully to attract Annachi's attention. Annachi sat up and put the paper away.

"Elshan?"

"Yes."

"Babikkins Neena too?"

Neena spoke as if she was facing the camera.

"Oh, my malik."

Elshan introduced the leaders :

"This is the first secretary of the party and the other, his hanger-on, Chathans."

(Chathans, you bastard!)

Annachi got up with a smile and welcomed the VIPs into the room.

"I've heard about you both," he said and the work force stood in a line against the wall with Neena Menon directly behind Annachi's chair.

"Would you have some tea?" he asked the leaders.

"No, thanks," the secretary said.

"Anything else?"

"Yes. We are here to discuss certain demands of the workers."

"You want money for the party?"

"That is also there but why did you raise the issue just now?"

"Revolution means collecting funds, isn't it?"

"He is an illiterate in politics, Chathans said to the secretary, tell him our demands first."

"How long have you been running the factory, Mr Annachi?" the secretary asked.

"For about five years now."

"What is the nature of the work?"

"Cutting match sticks into size and sending them on to Tamil Nadu for dipping, packing and marketing."

"That is all?"

"There is something else, but that is a secret," he said turning to Neena Menon. The cine girl blushed.

"What is the type of machinery you have on the premises?"

"Just a cutter, hand-operated."

"How much profit do you make a year?"

"About two thousand rupees."

"And still you pay the workers less than minimum wages?"

"But I consider it the maximum in the circumstances."

"You are anti-labour, you should pay them on par with the farm hands."

"How much is that?"

"Three sixty for men and two forty for virgins."

"Very good. Then?"

"And it has to be paid retroactively from the day we came to power."

"Another good suggestion. Please go on."

"And you have to pay them 20 per cent bonus a year to begin with."

"Well, well..."

"Then comes production bonus, recreation facilities, absentee pay, paid vacation..."

"Vacation where?"

"In the South of France?"

"Nice, and what else?"

"Finally the contribution that you have promised the party."

"How much do you expect?"

"Whatever four figure-amount comrade Annachi thinks is reasonable and revolutionary."

"You can have it."

The secretary was excited. He got up and addressed the workers.

"Comrades, comrade Annachi, I am glad to say, is a model Annachi. He has accepted all our demands without demur and has set an example to the capitalists the world over as to how they should behave under a revolution brought about by the golden path of Parliamentary Democracy."

Annachi said three cheers on behalf of his workers.

"I suppose it would do if I work the retroactive mechanism of the new wage scale from tomorrow?" he said.

The secretary said that would do.

"What do you say, Neena?" Annachi asked his favourite.

"I cherish Annachi's love more than anything else," she cooed.

"Wait," Chathans said to himself. "I am going to teach you some elementary lessons in proletarian love."

"What else, comrade?" Annachi asked the secretary.

"It is cold." Chathans said.

"Would you have a drink?"

"Oh, sure."

Annachi asked Elshan to fetch a bottle of country liquor. And the virgins may go home, he said. He wanted only men just then.

"I am not going," Neena Menon said.

"Why?"

"It is cold as Chathans said."

"Go into the kitchen and fry some papad and dry fish for snacks."

The rest of the virgins walked home in protest.

Elshan brought the drink and Neena produced glasses and water. Annachi poured half a glass each for the comrades and just a wee finger for himself.

"This is just to keep you company. I drink only whisky."

The comrades were glad of it but Elshan coughed gently, interestedly.

"You may drink tomorrow," Annachi told his foreman, "not tonight."

"A little," Elshan said.

"Go and sit in the machine room, all of you," Annachi said raising his voice. Elshan and comrades trooped out.

Chathans was delighted that Annachi had told off his workers. Elshan wants to drink along with his boss, does he? The cheek of the lousy proletariat!

He took a large gulp and said, "The arrack is weak."

"What is strong under your revolutionary rule, may I know?" Annachi retorted.

The comrades fumed within themselves at Annachi's hasty comment, but put a pleasant face on it all the same. Chathans recited the relevant thought in his mind... "We retreat when the enemy advances."

The mood of the river nearby was changing, like that of the Ganga described by Jawaharlal Nehru in his last will and testament, he thought. How many times have I watched this bloody river's mood clouding over at dusk and clearing at dawn. And how much more of it would I be watching. The revolutionary role of the party and the State administration have brought a qualitative change in the flow of the river, the wages of labour and the price of vegetables. Let inquilab continue to be zindabad. Coming to think of the word zindabad, he wondered if "zindabandh" wouldn't be a more appropriate term in these day of bandhs which was revolution by another name. And was the arrack so bad as he told Annachi? Wasn't the leadership also a bit confused just as the ranks they led? Wasn't the Confucian ode on conduct sans caste and creed the prime factor that helped the revolution in China? Was there any chance of revolution coming to our land where 33 million gods and castes still reigned supreme.

His thoughts tangled and it took him time to come out of the knots.

"I want another drink" he said, when came to.

"Want a drop?" Annachi asked Neena Menon.

She delivered an exquisite piece of dialogue into the camera. "I get the kick each time My Lord takes a sip."

Chathans controlled himself.

The papads remained untasted but the bottle was empty and the comrades looked at one another, rather depressed.

"What more is there to go with the eats?" Chathans asked.

"Shall I give you some special whisky, just a peg each?"

"Please."

"This is mixed with the holy ashes," Annachi said bringing out four ounce bottle, "and it'll give you an instant kick."

"God is great," said Chathans.

They drank to the Lord's health.

"I feel as if the double-edged sword of revolution is right inside my stomach," the secretary said.

Chathans put it one better. "There is a pool of flame in my throat." Annachi nodded.

Chathans lit a bidi and saw the secretary's head coming down on his lap.

"Let me rest for a while, Chathans," the diplomat said.

Chathans thought that he too could do with some rest. He gently shifted the secretary's head from his lap to the bench and crawled down to the floor on all fours.

"Sleep it off, you rascals," Annachi laughed.

He went out to the machine room and asked the workers to dismantle the cutting machine and pack it into gunny bags. He wanted to get it serviced at Coimbatore at once.

Elshan and folks thought that Annachi was high on spirits.

"Can't it wait till tomorrow morning?" he asked, "It is dark and..."

Annachi clenched his fist. "Do as you are told or I'll beat every one of you into pulp."

The situation looked odd to Elshan and the comrades but there was nothing to worry about, for the secretary and Chathans were there.

Operation dismantling was a success.

Annachi went to his room and started packing, ignoring Neena Menon who stood leaning against him with her clothes in disarray.

"Annachi," she said tenderly.

"What do you want?" he barked.

"May I kiss you?"

"I will kill you."

Neena Menon wept copiously. It looked as if the river had changed course and was flowing through her eyes.

"Where are you going?" she asked between sobs.

"Home."

"I am also going with you."

"What for?"

"I will follow you wherever you go. There is no life for me without you. We are one. As Walt Whitman said, 'you are me'."

"You are a nuisance," Annachi said...

"Please."

"Will it do if I rent a hut at my place for you?"

"It will be heaven for me."

"Will you behave?"

"Certainly."

"Or try to make a fast buck on the side?"

"Oh, no!"

"I will cut you to pieces if you cheat me."

"But you can't do away with me. Each drop of my blood will transform itself into a thousand Neenas."

"Who says so?"

"It is there in the new revolutionary song."

"MGR film?"

"Yes."

"Come along quietly then and take all the house hold utensils with you."

Outside, the workers had packed the gunny bags.

"Take them in a boat across the river to the railway station," Annachi said.

"The man is drunk to glory," Elshan told his friends.

They crossed over to the station and put the bags on the platform. Neena Menon and her boyfriend arrived a few minutes before the train was due.

Annachi called Mohamed, the railway porter aside, and whispered in his ears.

"Carry the timber over here tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," said Mohamed.

"Will the fellows raise a ruckus?"

"I will eat them raw if they dare," Mohamed said.

Annachi gave the porter an envelope.

The train steamed in and Mohamed put the gunny bags in the luggage van. And Neena was walking after Annachi into a carriage. Elshan asked her in a low voice, "Where are you going, please?"

"To Varanasi, please."

"Whatever for please?"

"To perform the annual ceremony of your father's death, please."

Annachi boarded the train, turned in the corridor of the carriage, and addressed his workers. "Look here, you idiots, bonus, wages and every other thing you bargained for have been entrusted with the secretary. Go and collect them in bulk."

This was not very clear to Elshan and friends but the secretary and Chathans were there after all and there was nothing to worry about.

The train let a long whistle in the dark and moved on with a jerk and as it cleared the platform Elshan looked at the red light at the back of the carriage and said aloud.

"I wonder where the two could be going at this time of the night."

Translated from Malayalam by the Author

Abhijit Vyas

Reminiscences

All the frozen memories
are lying now,
well outlined, in
photographic albums.

A whole era
from my life
has rippled away;
childhood, nursery, playmates,
school and comrades,
letters, friends, beloved,
the college canteen
and cigarette smoke—
all now has slipped
in woods of yesteryears.
A whole landscape
of teeming memories
in colour and
in black and white;
silent, chronicled account
of a chequered past
I love to ruminate upon
when showing it
sometimes… …

And at times again,
these birds from bygone days
suddenly begin to sing
and pour into my

dried, dying flowers
a breath of spring.

Reminiscences,
torn apart from my life
like autumn leaves,
swing with the wind
scorched in the sun,
sapless, dry.

And a body,
trembling, spent
Invokes the elements
dormant within
'O bubble, born in water,
break! Be borne by the wind
and flow like water once again.
I implore thee,
O mighty fire, burn,
blend with the earth,
and turn to ashes.
Then in open skies
raise a forest dense
of wheeling memories.

Someone will be there,
to brood over and to tend.'

And, then
I see a toddler
taking his very first steps,
shapping, unknowing
the album of reminiscences.
All these photographs
being neatly framed
speak to the child,
reveal to him,
for he is unaware
that some day,
he too will flow away
along with the memories.

In the end
there will remain
emptiness alone.

My room is charged
with your hush,
I know you converse
        only in silence
        and in perfect accord
Wherever we have been
the air still resounds
        with our silent talk
        in perfect accord.
Whenever I return there
        I am drowned
in the ocean of that silence.
I have not forgotten
        and never will
        unto eternity
our wordless dialogue
in perfect harmony.

Again and again
like the sun at the break of day,
the idea of your coming home
        returns
and then in deep gloom
I keep sitting in a lonely corner
        awaiting you
till the shadows in the evening
stretch thin and long like ghosts.

My ears are eager to hear
the cadence
of your approaching footfall;
and my eyes are agape
to see your lips
croon my creations
in soulful tunes.

But....
my ears fail to perceive
the echo of your silence.
I know silence alone
is your dialogue with me
in perfect harmony.

You left, beloved,
for regions I have never seen,
nor can I ever dream about—
in a breach of trust
negating our pledge
to eternal coexistence.
The stars are now shining in your eyes
and mine are brimming with tears.
Will you really never come back?
Night after night
I keep pacing till dawn
on sorrow-laden tracks
as if I myself had died.

Translated from Gujarati by Dhanavanti

Adyasha Das

Brother

Brother
A word that conjures up a million myriad images.
Gold-embossed.
Ever precious.

My childhood playmate.
Secret rendezvous, deep dark plans.
Lost games and fights of honour.
Scheming plots to get rid of the tutor.
Burning the midnight oil for exams.
Sharing, caring.
Then declaring war.
Never realized then that time flies.
Childhood is but a frolicking wave
in the vast ocean.
Can anyone hold it back?

Then those effervescent growing up years.
When the girl in me stirred awake.
And kid brother graduated to macho man.
Whispered consultations with the closest confidante.
Shy smiles threatening imminent blackmail.
Conditions to be met.
Notes to be exchanged.
Quarrels ended in cold war.
But there always followed a beautiful summer.
Thawing the ice with rainbow smiles.

Miss-you-moments at hostel.

Our first physical separation
when I became a poetess
and wrote you epic poems
of cherished memories
broken toys and teddy bears.

And then you returned.
To the sound of shehnai in our garden.
You kept searching my face.
A happy bride smiled back.
And then there were guests to attend to.
Jamai babu and the baaratis.
Until the moment of *bidai*
when you pushed through the crowd of crying women
held me close
and led me out
out of my secure threshold
to a new life.

Over the years you've stood by.
And witnessed the rearrangement
of my priorities.
Guess, life's like that.
Its Raksha Bandhan today.
And though you're always with me
days like this unleash feelings.
To get away from the routine
and reminisce.

Wherever you go
however you change
forever you'll remain my kid brother.
My solace, my strength.
My Blood Brother.

Akhilesh Mishra

Volcano of Terror

Seeds of terror planted in valleys, hills and fields afar as crops of freedom,
weeds of terror sowed in enemy lands — as invisible fighters for peace—
years festering under the carpet of diplomatic denials—
have surfaced as human volcanoes—nameless, formless, colourless...
Volcanoes, hiding in homes, offices and schools, temples and discotheques,
volcanoes, hiding in shoes and belts, toys and lunch boxes, in
someone's belly, someone's armpits, in your socks and his jacket.
Volcanoes, ready to burst over land, in water and sky,
and swamp with lava of blood and hatred and terror.
Lawless universe of fear has few rules to obey —
waves of panic pierce the heaviest of metal doors
and regroup defying thermodynamics.
Bullets of terror travel faster than the fastest runner on the earth,
faster than light,
arsenals of guns, tanks, missiles and satellites cannot save you from
the onslaught of the lava of terror.
Nothing is safe, no entirely secure refuge from fear,
none is small or big for the blast of terror to devour
A trail of havoc and destruction :
innocent bodies dismembered, blown to pieces.
fragile bones fractured by shock,
innocent hearts torn asunder,
tender minds stained for life by the splash of blood on their face.
A punishment for the crimes they committed:
The infant sucked a drop of milk more, than yesterday from
her mother's breast
The boy got over-excited to reach an hour early on his first date.
The little girl threw a perfect six to win the dice game.
The tottering old pressed his walking stick a little too hard.
The women called God by a different name.

Beware!
You cannot hide behind the curtain of ignorance,
nor behind the veil of innocence,
and escape the fiend of terror.

Remember!
His freedom: quench wanton thirst of innocent blood, of dissent.
Our freedom: the freedom to debate and disagree.

Unless we wake together and take his freedom to kill, one by one,
he will get us, one by one!

Lesson of Love

Remember, in an outburst of cloudy passion
how earnestly we vowed to share everything
our arms, our hearts, our lips, our thighs our most precious body treasures
effacing for ever the line between yours and mine
our hidden secrets, our breaths, our perspirations, our aspirations,
our dreams our nightmares

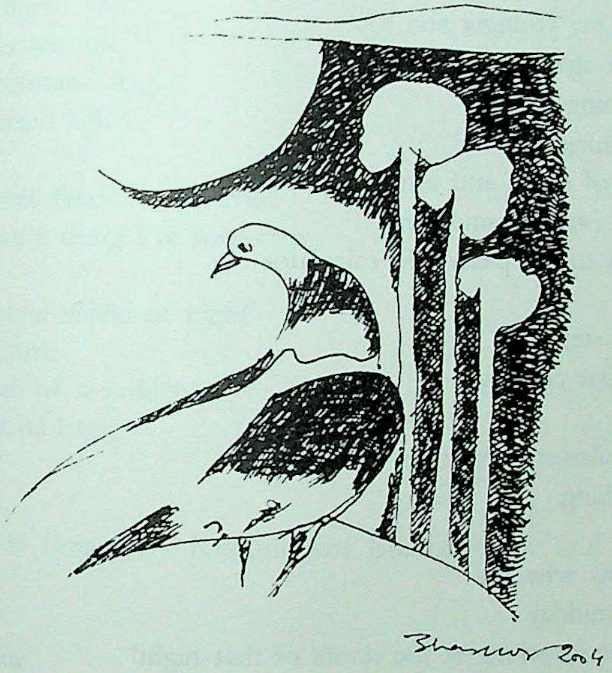
tearing apart the flimsy gown of time and space cocooning our beings
to subsume into the other, into eternal one-ness,
What happened, my love, when we closed our eyes and minds—
inebriated by the passion of love
Semi-torn shirts and gowns, soiled bras and panties
scattered here and there—in ubiquitous display of our irreverent love
Our common tooth-brushes, combs and razors
have all ganged up against you and me and
arisen like mountains between you and me.
How terrible! How awesome!
You and I standing before a mountain of soiled moments, an
impermeable wall
now we can't see each other without both shouting and screaming,
deafeningly, maddeningly

How can we meet except through wireless, internet
or in dreams, marred by acrimonious nightmares.
My love, what happened to our solemn pledge of eternal, immutable
love,

our passionate whispers into our most intimate ears—

A million times, to every hair, every pore of our two bodies-made one.
Why did we shut our eyes, our minds, our senses
And casually forget the lesson of love—
carrying love—like the balancing of a precious crystal doll on your palm
demands eternal vigilance.
Price of love, like price of freedom, is eternal vigilance.

❑



Dibyendu Palit

Elder Son, Younger Son

The portrait of my elder son on the wall
showing over the years
the same
smile of his twenty-first year.

In no time my younger son too
crossed that age.
In his combing fashion
and his clothing
in his style of stride and uttering
through his carefree smile and
in the digits of his palm-held calculator
I visualize
the haughty steps
of twenty-first century.

About the silence of years in between
I know nothing.

I don't know why my
own silent midday
smites in the knocking at the doors of that night!
And why my breath
heaves at times
in the smell of darkness and gunpowder,
and
in the noise of perpetual explosions
that fade, rending the sky apart.

I don't know why my
younger son's home-coming
arouses the memory
of our frenzied wake-up from slumber;
and
that restless voice,
'Mother, give me some food,
I've to leave at once.
If I don't return, do not worry—
see, I'll surely be back.'

The silence in between
offers me no further.

My younger son knows precisely
his comrade in arms and
the way he proceeds.
He shuns hunger
and his nights are too
lucent like decorated stages
in button-pressed lights.

Today I'm more fearless than ever;
and now many a thing I've forgotten.

In the unscathed shield of night
only one promise
awakens me all of a sudden—
see, I'll surely be back.

Translated from Bengali by Krishnanjan Bhattacharjee and the Poet

Bharatvarsha

Sitting in the hotel-lobby Lucy said,
'India? I know it very well.'

Though she didn't say *Bharatvarsha,* she said India—
while uttering it her golden hair swayed,

the knees that unveiled suddenly underneath the skirt
and the legs below the knees
revealed, that
India is far away.

The rain of Amsterdam doesn't carry one to India.
When the roads here are gradually getting snow-coat
what happens there even Lord Krishna knows not;
snow brings the memory of the Himalayas, Tenzing Norge, Yeti,
and the solitary corpse inside the morgue,
and of Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Simla cut off in sudden landslide.

'Before I went to India
everyone farbade me.
They said, don't go—
'coz your hair is golden,
'coz you are healthy,
'coz you are pretty—
they will rape you.'

I intently went on listening to her ;
I intently went on watching the rain outside.

Lucy stretching her absorption further uttered,
'Such a wonderful country is India!
So nice are the people there!
Me and my girlfriend—
Just think of two golden-haired pretty gals—
We travelled for two months in India.
But forget about raping
nobody touched us even!'

Translated from Bengali by Krishnanjan Bhattacharjee and the Poet

Still Someone

Do not forbid, let him
enter. Look around the house if there's anything to offer. Nothing?
Then atleast

drag the chair from the corner n' let him sit; bring
the vintage sweet-balls in box, chilled water in brass-bowl.
Tell him so long you waited, so long
witnessed the same sun setting in.

So that gauging deep into your slumber,
he should think at least for once
the endless road ahead is solitary, albeit someone
still waits for someone.

Translated from Bengali by Krishnanjan Bhattacharjee and the Poet

Await

One day love will transcend with a casual tap at the door;
await.
The footsteps will resound like the cruel menace of a gusty wind
sharpening its fangs with a perilous whim.
There are roads on your both sides, the balconies of
decorated buildings are stupefied, mockery of lights all around—

Amid dream or death or in
arising, along the sun
alone, forlorn, amid this suicidal melancholy
await, keep waiting though.

Translated from Bengali by Krishnanjan Bhattacharjee and the Poet

Whoever Sends

Whoever sends blood, smears often the sender's hand.
Albeit written in ink, no letter bears any pain or moan seeming
like something immediately colourful; whoever sends it gets hurt by hurled
stones.

Or else whatever destined happens in that orbit—
Beyond the eyes, amid sunshine, through wind, the motion that has to

be traversed!
One blood-stained envelop flies down to the heart.

Translated from Bengali by Krishnanjan Bhattacharjee and the Poet

My Fathomless Pain

My fathomless pain rests on his heart
where is he amid void and wind
parted so long leaving the buttonholes open?
I suffer from cold, midnight hallucination
the insults of bygone times, return in joy
Whatever direction proceeds the solitary way's grief
I proceed to the opposite
to find everything left as it is and find the sigh
has left the dust a bit unknown
My fathomless pain is knowing them alone
being timeless amid the even and odd hours, light and darkness.

Translated from Bengali by Krishnanjan Bhattacharjee and the Poet

Ila Kumar

I Drink Up the Sun

The bottom of the thermos glitters
in the glare of sun-rays;
golden ripples merge into water
I drink up the sun.

Translated from Hindi by Sudeep Ghosh

Tell Me

Tell me
the truth
which
I said not
but
you heard
time and again,
that truth
tell me once.

Translated from Hindi by Sudeep Ghosh

The Sea of Dreams

I have just left behind
the sea of dreams,
few lamps flicker

like the slender magic wand
standing upright
amid tiny, shiny throbs.
It will stay with me night-long.
Like the breath
propping up a long journey
the sea of dreams
I left behind
makes after me,
flowing out of
the chasms of the train's wheels.
It will stay with me night-long.

Translated from Hindi by Sudeep Ghosh

Awaiting a Spark

At times in her eyes
the Ganga wells up,
the far-off expanse—
the flow and boundless waters
embodied in the sea,
echoes issuing from Gomukh
lingers into Gangasagar;
the watery frame of Prayag
deepens as it makes out,
the out-stretched arms at Hooghly's river-mouth
weave an aura of mystique.
Impetuous heat
is stock-still
awaiting a spark.

Translated from Hindi by Sudeep Ghosh

The Wayward Wind

That night
came into being

a threshold of natural fancy
a sight visible from afar
the wind kept rapping,
pushing the lightly-held door-chain.

She couldn't muster up
the guts to sneak in;
only by her tinkle-touch
kept us on tenterhooks

The truths
dispersed close-by
to be held daringly
was found
wanting in the wayward wind.

Translated from Hindi by Sudeep Ghosh

❑

Krishna Jha

Beyond the Threshold

I saw you coming down the rocky path,
dishevelled, with bloody scratches oozing all over.
When they snatched your whimpering baby away,
you knew each of them,
though slowly merging into one,
and then dimming again into anonymity
as you could not bear the pain of knowledge.
Long days and dark nights, fields and forests,
you tried to put between them and you,
carrying the baby in arms, and one within,
you still wanted to hold the moon,
in your palms,
glistening and stripping away from your fingers.
Yet it was in the gold of setting sun
and the pearly moon, remote and cool
rising in the azure sky
when they came
to you, unto you, beyond you.
Savouring the drops that
still sparkled on you,
they left—only to live eternally
in the limits that remained of you.

Shivering, you feel the streaming light
beyond the threshold
that is yet to be crossed….

The poem was written after meeting a victim in Godhra relief camp following the carnage in Gujarat.

Wall Which is no Wall But Another Opening

They take away my world, and leave me to create another,
I begin my journey, towards an end that has no other end.

I ask for the roots that were once mine,
I am offered tombs that dot the villages I leave,
happening push me to a wall,
which is no wall but another opening.

An opening, ablaze,
scorching, davouring all that is sacred,
yet with it comes the solace,
dawn may not be far from here.

I wanted to remember the song
always on my mother's lips,
it is in the rustle and the breeze,
that it comes to me
from the far off rocks and the patches of green,
from the sobs of hunger and wails of living dead,
from the stumps that were once homes,
from the rivers that flow no more.

The sky is walled up, dark shadows hang over the emerald earth,
Anchors are swept away in the hurricane,
yet I cannot bow to the end that is no end.

Thrown into the river of Rubicon
all bridges and boats washed away,
I cannot swim back to my barred being,
and the river has no other shore,
only a cross, to be carried and get crucified.

The poem was written while travelling in the forests and ravines of Madhya Pradesh and sharing the agony of the rootless.

Roohi Majid

Mother India

(On the 55th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi' s assassination)

This deluge of blood and fire.
Volcanoes of communal violence.
Has Odysseus really reached Ithaca,
or is it Ithaca that's no longer there.

Where is the place, the narrow dusty
lanes edging farms and fields?
Lakes and brooks along hills and glens?

Eye of the sun stares at murky,
bloody water. Light-fragments
zipped in breeze are no diamonds.

Where is the bustling market, patch work
crowd? Stalls of fruits and flowers, scented
garlands for *puja* and calls of *muazzin*[1]?

And wild growth along hidden pathways,
leading to pastures where sheep grazed.
Our bit of Eden is there no more.

The excitement of picking marigold
magnolia, jasmine and basil to 'scatter
at Saraswati's feet—the goddess of Arts.

Where is the land I left decades ago
with the custodians of Ganga and Jamuna

---

[1] One who calls Muslims to prayers

Mind
(After Emily Dickinson)

The sky, the sea, all
that they surround,
has no materiality,
no intrinsic quality.

A world of illusion
seized by the mind.
On-line brain messages
Carve mind-images.

Mind, wider than blue sky,
deeper than deep sea.
Creative flair contains all.
From the point of inception,
to the moment of conception,
idea exists on the continuum
of mind—its perception.

God, the source of all creation,
essence of things created, is mind,
to vary in degree, not in kind,
inseparable, as syllable from sound.

Lighting a Candle

A shelter in the woods, nestled between pines
and date palms, in the shadow of Eucalyptus trees.
Slender pillars support the roof of entwining branches.

A perfect summer house, a hide out at dusk.
Suddenly from behind the trees, appears
a slow moving configuration of candles.

Many colours sparkling intermittently.
Roses look whiter than white.
And leaves dusky green.

Tiny sparkles flickering in the trees
at a pace faster than the enfolding of night.
Rose-mary and lavender cast into a filigree of light.

And the wood's transformed into Brindaban...
Jubilant people of ancient India celebrate
Rama and Sita's return from long exile.

They line up along the road holding *deepas*.
The wind swishing leaping flames; and now
the frenzy of the flame dance around the bushes.

Flames, here hold a mirror to my childhood...
Spring evening cool with earth's perspiration.
I see myself and my cousins barefoot on moist grass;

Running around, laughing and chasing each other;
and chasing the fire flies in the circle of light.
An ecstatic dance of moments lit in memory.

I light a candle in *Casa Lucia*.

Sacred Motion

Being carried away on the back
of the rhythm; wave after wave
pulling farther into the depths;
emotions, tuned-in-serenity.

The solace in going into
the indifference of chance.
Floating with the motion; breeze,
interlacing surface tension—
glossed over by rays' glint.

Drifting from ripple within ripple;
slowly, gradually, completely.
the noumenal of my being, released
from the mirage of senses.

Melody ebbs and flows:
the breath of the new born.
The primordial sigh resurfaces
in rhythmic patterns of sound.

Far from desolate shores, debris
of consciousness. Unreached by crashing
waves, mounting tides, gales, storms.

Immortality borne of the sacred motion.

❑

Sumatheendra Nadig

The Sky Was Not Astonished

The earth asked the sky
"Whom do you trust?"
"I trust the water" said the earth,
and the wind and the fire got angry.

The earth asked the water
"Whom do you trust?"
"I trust you" said the water,
and the wind and the fire got angry.

The water asked the wind
"Whom do you trust?"
"I trust the fire" said the wind
and the water and the earth felt enraged.

The wind asked the fire
"Whom do you trust?"
"I trust you" said the fire
and the water and the earth felt enraged.

The wind, the fire, the earth and the water
wondered why the sky did not get angry.
The sky did not wonder.

Translated from Kannada by the Poet

Lovers
(After a painting by Chagall)

The lovers fly over houses,
over streets, lanes and fields.
Happy to live in the sky
they roam where they please.

"The sky is not the property of the Sun and the Moon alone"
they say, "We also have a share."
They bathe in the blue and cover themselves with moonlight,
they float at ease in the endless blue.

With the shape of one body matched to the other
they lose themselves in love;
fused like word and meaning, they bless the world,
mankind, animals and plants.

Look at the youth, with one foot firm on the ground,
lifts the lass holding her left hand in his right,
she turns like a top, or a potter's wheel,
Or like the setting sun in the Western Ghats.

The youth envelops her like a breeze sometimes,
and sometimes lifts her up, like a bull.
Is she, any the less for him?
She carries him like a child in her arms.

Translated from Kannada by the Poet

Poetry
(To Naomi Shihab Nye)

The schizophrenic silent for three years
screamed that he hates his father
when you read a poem about a father.

The speechless schizophrenic became a teacher, you said.
I believe you; poetry makes strange things happen.
I reach the society in me
when I start writing,

and the society meets me in my poems.

My father, who is my child,
likes poetry whether I read or sing.
Poetry heals, you say,
and I say, yes, because it reaches the source of joy.
It digs and bores, painlessly,
until it reaches Love, the water of life,
and then it shoots out like a fountain
and we become children and play.

Awake or asleep I dream a lot.
Once I dreamed these lines:

"Incessant rain
in Love's terrain."

Translated from Kannada by the Poet

Mummifier

I knew it was dead
whatever it was between us growing with promise.
I knew it was dead
but didn't believe it, until I saw the carcass.

It doesn't stink.
Thank you for embalming it,
for mummifying it,
for preserving it,
and carrying it with you
as proof of its death,
of something between us
whatever it was.

Let me not harp on whatever was
and is now dead between us;
I didn't know you love corpses.

Translated from Kannada by the Poet

Edgar Allen Poe

Blake knew the ecstasy of terror
but opted for joy;
Poe knew the ecstasy of terror,
and sought it with joy.

Standing on the edge of the precipice
he loved the fear of heights,
loved to be buried alive
and craved for terrible nights.

He loved the death of beloveds
managed to get them killed.
Or got them buried still alive
and their return he willed.

"Come back, come back, my darlings
breaking the lid of coffins,
come back with stains of blood on your lips.
Let us ride on the back of dolphins.

Come back staggering in storms
and break open the heavy door
of my heart, which I can't bear,
and dash me dead to the floor."

Translated from Kannada by the Poet

Morbid Thoughts

When people want to tear someone to pieces
they know whom to tear to pieces;
when they think of lunging a knife
into someone's guts
they know whose guts they are after,
when they want to splash someone's red blood
into a *Mandala* or *Swastika,*
They know whose blood it is;

when they want to barbecue someone's heart
they know whose heart it is.

I don't want to sound gory, morbid and sickening
like some of Fellini's shorts;
I want to do all such things
but don't know my victims,
except one who is myself.

Translated from Kannada by the Poet

The Bee and the Lotus

My son, don't take the Krishna story
so light. All the world is a stage
and you are an actor. You want to play
only one role, the role of Krishna as lover.

My dear actor,
on the stage you may pretend and you may flirt;
but when you are caught alone in the green room
you don't know how soon the green room becomes dark

After a few moments
suddenly there will be light.
Fellow actors find you in a compromising position,
and think that you are committed.
You get scared of their disapproval
and you pretend that you are a committed man.
The bee gets trapped inside the lotus.

Translated from Kannada by the Poet

Sutapa Sengupta

The Man I Create: Dearest Shyam

One

Medium height, gentle, ram-rod straight–
like a youthful *sal*
light filtering through fresh green leaves–

Your body fascinates me and
your holding of an umbrella in pouring rain.

Why this diffidence, shying away from touch
Did you expect me only to accept the care
and not the caress?

Two

I smoke, your hand lies on the backrest
touching my back with the train's jerky motion,
it feels incredibly peaceful.

This long-famished body
craves for a taste of the hand
bit by bit
rolled around the tongue with great relish
like a beggar's dinner going on and on.

One cigarette's over
I light another, and another, once more, again.....

The brown back and the fair hand
pretend not to notice each other
in the empty corridor.

Three

This secret rendezvous, this hush-hush liaison
is it desirable at the age?
What age is this age? You are thirty-two and
I shall be forty-two next November.

You have a docile wife, quite a lovely thing
my husband too is handsome,
top macho, baritone voice.

Then why do these breasts taut up
at your pawing, you naughty rotty boy?

Four

Your crazy arrival in the morning
your enthralled breath
your gift of a morning flower in the evening
unbuttons the dress I wear.

Your urgent kisses, the heat of your restless hands
heavy and statuesque thighs
I shall wring everything dry
and teach you, by begging or spurning,
you gawky boy
the art of making love

Five

The train has stalled at Sainthia station
you aren't by my side, like that other day
to bother me.

I'm alone for a long long time
this town remains depressed, aloof
even uncaring,
only tries to remind me.
Since I'm smart, I ain't crying.

Six

I haven't given up on hope yet.
All these trappings
this drawing of a chair and sitting behind
the lonely, unobtrusive pillar on the veranda
with the hope that you might still come
waiting with drooping eyes and
drifting towards a death-wish
in tune with the soulful songs
Of Rafi, Kishore, Manna De.
Soaping all over in a long-drawn bath
wearing freshly laundered dress
I wait all ears for the night's knocking on the door.

Seven

You have your marital chores
futile window-shopping with Big Shopper in hand

With school, poetry, husband and son
I have my own 'Toy Story.'

All these existed before
only this meeting with you, dearest Shyam,
ends where the unimaginable begins.

Translated from Bengali by Arunabha Ghosh

Vasdev Mohi

Demonstration

It is quite some time now
I have been chanting slogans;
my throat is dry,
no water anywhere nearby

leave the chair
leave the chair

Jagno, what must he be doing
at this time?
Maybe loafing around;
the idiot comes to mind quite often.
Eeso must be busy studying
he can recite table of two flawlessly
I'll educate him,
get him a government job;
he will become a peon

leave the chair
leave the chair

The neighbours will be amazed,
family status will go up—
Naathi touches the height of
her mother's shoulders;
shall get her married.

I got to save some money
times are bad indeed.

Nathu's Rama
Lalu's Ramoo
disappeared;
they are not traced till date.

Feel very hungry
hunger comes everyday,
work, only some days;
have not eaten grams since yesterday,
filled stomach only with water
what the children must have eaten?
And Mani?

Stupid villager!
shout loudly
simply whispering Kaalu ustaad skin you alive

leave the chair
leave the chair

Kaalu Ustad!
May the Mother Goddess bless him;
seeing me unemployed
he gave me work
chant slogans, in a demonstration,
to Rajmahal–nay, Rajbhavan.

Strange is the language of the city
a crowd of people is called Demonstration
and shouts, slogans!
Yes, I'll learn
I'll have to learn everything.
The village is completely devastated
Mother Goddess's wrath has befallen
since the last four years…not a drop of water

leave the chair
leave the chair

What is this?
Damp logs burning in the city also!

Everything is enveloped in smoke
everyone is weeping
        shedding tears
eyes are burning
everyone is running...hiding....

I'll not run away
I'll shout—no, chant slogans
will go to Rajmahal—nay, Rajbhavan
Kaalu Ustad-Kalu God will be happy;
will give me work

Leave the chair
leave the chair

Translated from Sindhi by Mohan Gehani

Joy-ride

At last
before our very eyes
the bulldozer swept away
everyone's home
thatches, bricks, wood... all
turned into earth

Utensils, things
        some, managed to save
some crushed as tin sheets

Breast-beating of women
men with wide eyes
forehead as a ploughed field,
eyes gaze at things
without blinking.

I do not hear anything.

Churning inside,
raging fire

legs wobbling
nostrils expanding/contracting
dry...completely dry mouth.

Big judge also
sided with landlord
and sent the bulldozer

Slum children are running
behind the bulldozer
they keep screaming with glee
as they used to
while chasing the landlord's car

Someone jerked my arm
small Manu said
'*Manku chaacha! Manku chaacha!*
ask the driver of this big vehicle
to give me a ride.'

Translated from Sindhi by Mohan Gehani

Home-2

Since many days
there was no news from Mani;
I would go to Post Babu daily
he would bark everytime
    you'll get letter at your address

I daily repeated—
huts had been razed
by Big Seth
my companions and I
sleep on a footpath
far away;
how could a postman find anyone?
He would see only the deserted place
and go back

Today a good Babu was there;
he searched
found two cards for me—
in the first card was the news
of the mercy of the Mother Goddess,
it had rained after a long time,
every place was all green,
everyone was happy.
Another card spoke of
the wrath of the Mother Goddess—
in the village, huts were
swept away
Danu Chaacha had been drowned
the village people had gone away
        to wherever they could;
the village was flooded.
Mani, with children, had gone to
the neighbouring Nandu Gaon;
they lived
under a Banyan tree—
        some village people were also with her.

Legs started wobbling,
on slow, unsteady feet
I reached the footpath;
perhaps, seeing my downcast face
Chamanbhai asked about it—
I told him all about it
tears streamed down from his eyes;
instantly he smiled
your home is ready now—
the roof is the Banyan tree's canopy;
the footpath, the floor beneath.

Translated from Sindhi by Mohan Gehani

Ved Rahi

Words

Quite a few words have left the field,
they are sitting on the sidelines
Sad, down-cast;
now no one uses them.
Their meanings have boarded life-boats
and deserted the sinking ships
like some frightened passengers.

On the other hand,
many words are surging forward eagerly
towards new horizons.
They've been globalized;
the supremacy of world market
is beckoning them.

Look at these words—
how fondly they are
joining other words
to supplement their strength;
and there, quite a few words
are lying in wait for a chance
too clandestinely hijack
the meaning of others.

Some words
are bored with their beauty
Anyone, everyone
is going after them
aimlessly.

Some words keep sulking
all the twenty-four hours,
too touchy, coquettish,
they don't talk to any one.

Some words are loving, large-hearted;
They open themselves up completely
before writers—
like a lady-love shedding her clothes
before her lover

Many words are like the beats on a drum
bells of meaning follow them, confuse them
Both, madly in love with each other,
keep dancing, intoxicated
continuously, in one tune.

Even in silence, words speak
like fireflies in darkness
like tears in prayer
like hands in love-making,

There are words
which do not carry the burden of their meanings,
which are the same in all languages.
They speak
when a mother breast-feeds her infant
when a beloved makes love
or, when someone gets drowned
or, when a player scores a goal
or, when some musician
plays a note
which is his soul.

There are also words
which writers fear, avoid,
these are words which would've
given some-time in the past
the last drop of their identity
to some great writer

Falling into uncouth hands
words die like rats,
also like dogs.

Meaningful words
written on a slate
even when wiped away
do not lose their meanings.

You may fill words
with the vastness of oceans
the expanse of the skies—
their form remains the same
they do not get puffed up.

Words may be seen
as stars reflected in waters;
their meanings can be seen
shining up in the sky.

There are colours in words
also touches
and fragrances—
colours contain pictures
touches contain recognition,
fragrances contain invitations.

Look at this word;
being born,
see how it emerges
from the womb of thought—
See how the hands that create it
are supporting it;
how the natal connection is cut
how it is being fed.

Translated from Dogri by Shivanath

Sunrise

Sometimes
the sun rises
from behind clouds
like some child
waking unwillingly
pushing aside the quilt
and yet not quite doing it
opening his eyes, time and again
to see
how early it is
and how cold.

Sometimes
it also comes out
like boys leaving school
as the bell goes
looks as though it wants
to cover the whole earth in two steps.

Sometimes
the sun is seen
sitting on the attic
like some fat, big monkey
peeping into the courtyard
looking out for a chance
to raid and grab.

Often
The sun rises
with a tender face
like some close friend
come across after a long time.

Sometimes
it shoots up with force
like some revolutionary
risen to transform the world.

Many times
it emerges like an ascetic
wrapped in saffron
sitting in samadhi
at one spot
while the Universe
revolves across it.

Sometimes
the sun sounds
like the pancham note
coming out of a flute
creating Vrindavana
beckoning gopis.

Sometimes
the sun looks
impetuous like me;
when I come to meet you
rays radiating,
racing ahead of me.

Translated from Dogri by Shivanath

❑

Vinod Sharma

Solitude

1

When by himself
at the first chance
many people descend upon him–
those whom he knows abhor him
and those whom he abhors,
they too.

2

In the bedroom too
one is not really alone—
Seeking pleasure in each other's body
husband and wife also.
The sweetheart lodged in the husband's heart
and the lover lodged in the wife's heart—
these two are
present there also
over and above
their two selves

Each of the two thinks
three are alright but this fourth one....
And each asks each-self
who is this fourth?
It's the very question
that's the silence spread between them

3

No sooner does the sun go down,
spreads without and within me
darkness

Without lies the darkness without an existence of its own
just a name for the sun's absence

Within, lies that
without an existence of its own
which is just a name for your absence

As long as the darkness of the absence of your love
does not ally with these two darknesses
and attack me,
living is possible.

4

No sooner does night lay siege
I begin reading my love poems
inventing glorious colours of love
to colour my dreams,
to hide my despair, helplessness, emptiness
oblivious to the fact
that you will meet me in the morning
concealing yourself in
these very colours.

Translated from Hindi by Raji Narasimhan

I Do Not Know

In the city where
on the issue of morality
intellectuals debate like
lawyers who have realized in
fees hefty sums from murderers

on false promises
of winning their case.
To intervene
in this unending debate of
intellectuals
what kind of poetry
I should write
I do not know

Translated from Hindi by Raji Narasimhan

Love

Between the illusion of acceptance
and the darkness of non-acceptance
On a point of light
the possibility of seeing love face to face
is a mystery
in which are contained

Many many worlds'
countless, glittering stars
on countless skyways
reflections of love
glittering
on countless mirrors

Soliloquy

Whatever happened
happened right
What was wrong
did not happen—

Actually though
what happened
was wrong.
And that which was right

that it was
that didn't happen

Translated from Hindi by Raji Narasimhan

Face to Face

Earth:
from the Eye of Cosmic Man
sped down the shoreless void
ripping apart
the horizon's indifference

And then froze
the tear in the eye

What thought He,
Cosmic Man?
Or came He face to face
with the pain
of Creation? Who knows?

Translated from Hindi by Raji Narasimhan

❑

Son

B. Murali

Little Nancy Etticot, in a white petticoat....Vinu tried to believe that his father's fingers were dancing on the table in the restaurant to the tune of this nursery rhyme. The flesh-coloured lips of Shirely Miss open in this rhythm. Her lips close again at the finish of the line *in a white petticoat*. Vinu's father is moving his fingers on the table. Too much smoking has turned his fingernails yellowish. His hard fingers. The sticky lips of Sherly Miss. Where is the waiter with the ice cream?

Now, a house fly has started walking from one side of the table. It is coming fearlessly towards his dancing fingers. Vinu tried hard to keep silent. Then he said: "Please leave it. It may die."

"It may die? What are you talking about Vinu?" Father asked as if slowly emerging from a sweet recollection.

By that time the fly moved over to another table. So Vinu lost the course of its movement. "That fly could have been dead," he said.

His father used to pick out expensive restaurants. This too is one such. He does not expect a housefly here. Then he told Vinu in an ill-tempered tone: "Shirley Miss has merely mentioned it. You are concentrating so much on stupid things."

Now he will start talking about the progress report, Vinu thought. He is within the first ten ranks. But Shirley Miss says: "I sincerely wish Ramesh Sir's boy should get the first rank. Of course he will get admission to the UKG class. I am sure of that. But Sir, do you know the level of competition among parents? I think you should ask your wife to persuade Vinu to work a little more...."

In the evening Praseetha had asked Vinu in the school's courtyard: "Not coming?" "My father will come," replied Vinu. "Is he coming because Shirley Miss asked him to come so that she can tell him your marks has gone down?" Meanwhile Sister Ursula had gathered all the students including

Praseetha into the school bus. Just then a Bajaj scooter reached the school gate. "Why didn't he take out the car?" Vinu caught the bougainvillea shoot that came dangling in the wind, thinking about his father's car. He would stand outside the gate till a cigarette finished. By then all the din would go down.

Shirley Miss was asking Vinu's father : "Your wife can't find enough time to attend to Vinu's studies?"

"Vinu, go and play with your friends for a while. I have to discuss your studies with Shirley Miss," his father said.

Was he not aware that Vinu was stepping out to an empty courtyard? Vinu moved towards the bougainvillea. He scratched his shoes against the ground furiously.

Then, after a whole hour, taking a round of the traffic island, his father asked Vinu: "What do you like to have today? Ice cream? Or do you prefer to go to the park?"

Vinu didn't say anything.

He was looking at his father fiercely without getting his reflection caught on the rear-view mirror. There the traffic was confusing, especially when a child was sitting behind the scooter. Father again asked Vinu after getting through the traffic block.

"Vinu, you heard me? Do you want the ice cream?"

Still Vinu didn't say anything.

He was remembering the morning's quarrel.

He told his mother bluntly that this much home work could not be done at all. This sort of opinions should not be aired loudly. But his comment was made exactly when his father was rushing towards the toilet.

Father expressed his displeasure that Vinu started naughty talk first thing in the morning. His morning words were always coarse due to his ill-tempered late beginning of the day. He had told his wife last night : "Nowadays Vinu speaks in an authoritative tone. That will destroy his child-like nature."

"He is doing too much homework. Beyond his limit," she said.

"Shirley told me last time that he is far behind in Mathematics," he said.

"Why? Is Shirley his Maths teacher?" She said in annoyance, turning away from him in the bed.

Then he stood up and kept on reading something for a long time and slept very late. The late rising owing to this made him harsh in the morning. She could have woken him up a little earlier, he thought.

"Shirley Miss is lying," said Vinu. "Shirley Miss never checks my notes."

"It is a long time since I went to his school," said his mother. "We are just leaving him at the bus stop."

"I am busier than you are," said his father.

"But you told me yesterday that you had seen her last week." She put the dish with dosa on the table with a bang.

"On the day of the circus, Father came to the school but didn't bring back me with him on the scooter. He told me to go by the bus," said Vinu.

"I am very anxious about his studies," he said. "Acutally I am finding time to look into his studies between my hectic schedule," he continued.

When a distant possibility of a traffic block was sensed, he stopped the scooter by the side of the road so that a smoky government bus could pass by. Vinu hasn't yet answered the question of ice cream. The morning time to the school was also by the scooter. The school bus had already gone by the time Vinu's father got dressed up and reached the stop. Then he stood there and smoked a cigarette. After that he took Vinu to the school on his scooter.

During the journey Vinu said : "Prabhu has got new toys."

He replied : "Why do you want toys? Your are indulging in cross-talks instead of playing with the toys."

"I need toys," Vinu sounded firm.

"You could have gone by the bus if you woke up earlier," his father said in an irritating tone.

"I woke up early" Vinu said.

By then, the scooter reached the school gate. The school bus had reached there just minutes before. Children were getting down from the bus. Vinu jumped down from the scooter and ran towards them and joined the chaos. It was when he was half-way back that his father realized that Vinu's water bottle was left behind in the scooter's dickey.

Sometime in the midst of traffic block the father thought he heard Vinu agreeing to have ice cream. That is why he took him to this posh restaurant. The waiter knows that Vinu needed an ice-cream and his father a cold coffee.

"That fly could have been dead," Vinu repeated.

"Vinu, flies are dirty beings. They carry disease." He tried to enlighten him.

Basic Science is also the subject dealt with by Shirley Miss. So Vinu felt as if he was sitting in a boring class.

When the ice cream was about to be finished, he asked : "Shall I go to school with Poornima Chechi?"

Father asked : "Poornima is studying in another school, no? There are no good teachers there."

Vinu : "There are. Plenty of thus she told me yesterday."

He scolded Vinu : "Don't' be silly. This school is better for you. Do you know how much money I deposited to get you admitted there?"

"I will not go to that school."

"You are a fool. I should have been tougher with you. Look, ice cream fell on your uniform. Don't you see that other children behave better."

Vinu firmly said : "I am not a fool."

His father said : "Finish the ice cream quickly. Or else, your flies will come again."

When they got out of the restaurant, Vinu was in an elated mood. All the objects around were pulsating in a pleasant rhythm. A trolley that just passed him with red flowers also produced in him the same rhythm. An ox cart turned towards the market with a *kata-kata.* Vinu felt like jumping up and down. He held his father's fingers and hopped twice.

"Vinu, be careful," his father became irritated. Vinu couldn't care less and jumped again. The footpath was brimming with people. He was moving through them in a peculiar rhythm by which the whole crowd throbbed. Suddenly Vinu got at mystery of that rhythm. Oh! The song of Shirley Miss : *Little Nancy Etticot, In a white petticoat*….The moment he encountered the song, he was deprived of all his pounding enthusiasm. Both of them were soon lost in a chaotic movement of rhythmless human beings.

Now, emerging from the crowd, they are walking alongside a large psychedelic cloth shop. A mannequin that kept turning its head left and right at random is clad in the sari of Shirley Miss. No, Shirley Miss puts on the sari of the dummy.

Hey, here comes down a star so low towards his head that Vinu can just catch it. Vinu turns his nose towards it and tried to grab the star. Wow! What a reddish glow. *In a white petticoat...and a red nose…*The red painted lips of Shirley Miss. A fat woman in a sleeveless blouse passes along heedlessly and hits Vinu with her shoulder bag. Damn. It aches. That reckless fatty is speeding off even without offering an apology. Haven't daddy noticed it? Shirley Miss was also in a sleeveless blouse yesterday.

Shirley Miss is getting into the class holding a huge attendance register. Just like that fatty. Then she is pinching Ann Mary's ears. There, a little girl is crying holding her mother's hand in the opposite sideway. Ann Mary is crying. Vinu too feels like crying. Shirley Miss won't speak to all the teachers. She wears a large bindi. She laughs loudly whenever daddy visits. Vinu stood motionless in the middle of the street.

"What are you thinking about? Walk quickly," Father said.

Vinu didn't move.

"What happened? Move. Vinu what are you thinking?" he asked again.

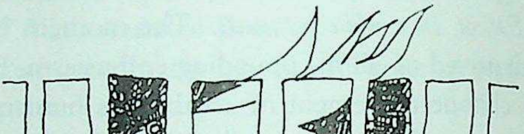
"Shirley Miss is a flirt," said Vinu.

"What did you say?" he boxed Vinu's ear hard. "Who planted this sort of thing into your head?...dirty chatter box....." He pulled Vinu's hands strongly towards him.

But suddenly he fell silent for a few moments and then turned to Vinu gently and asked in an affectionate tone : "Vinu, do you want toys?"

Vinu felt like laughing heartily. But if he bursts into laughter now, will his father not sense that he had caught up with his abrupt emotional collapse? So, Vinu laughed to a lion king in the display board of a fancy shop opposite to them.

Translated from Malayalam by the Author



Hunger

Kolakaluri Enoch

Sometime early in the morning or last night, a bull frog died on the road. A car or lorry ran over it. All the four legs of the frog were pinned to the earth. Its belly burst like a tomato. A mishmash of its guts, blood and flesh lay splattered. The back and the belly of the creature were together fastened to the ground.

That frog would never jump or leap. It would never croak, when it rained or flooded. Nor would it stir or cry. It must have come actively jumping and vigorously leaping. To eat something bellyful! To achieve some end! But it lay dead now.

Under the tamarind tree, placing her head between the knees, leaning her back against the tree, encircling her arms around her legs sat Chinni frightened and looked at the frog. The road on which the creature lay dead stretched on both sides like God's infinite nature. On the other side of the road, beyond the sandy stretch, in the sky gathered clouds as if crowning the hill.

Raining incessantly since the last ten days. The tiny leaves, twigs and bits of tamarind bark fallen beneath the tree looked strange, turning colour in the water. The ground was wet on the road and slushy beside the tree. If one set foot there, the nerves got a mild shock of chill. Chinni sat placing her feet on the protruding roots of the tamarind tree. She felt the dampness seeping through her back.

A powerful blast of wind came. Drops of rain caught in the tree fell down heavily. The sun had not yet shown itself though it was nine.

On both sides of the road were houses. On the right side, in the village were the concrete buildings. On the left, in the hamlet were the shacks. The right called the left for farm work and paid wages. To guard the left hamlet from spreading towards the right and the reverse, like the edict of the Vedas, like the betrayal of modern times lay the road which was neither young nor old, neither dilapidated nor a dirt track. Nor was it a rickety one but the concrete road — a shining, joyous one, eternally resplendent. That road did not move or change. Like the law down by the government, it did not stir from the place it was laid on. The hamlet and the village within the eyesight of each other. But they neither move nor get tired of each other.

The seven-year-old Chinni was from the left hamlet. She sat merely and watched the road aimlessly. What she had on her body wore a resemblance to a skirt and a blouse. Dirty, darned again and again they were falling to pieces.

Chinni was of course pretty. The snot below her nose could, no doubt, be cleaned. The dirt on her body could, no doubt, be washed off. What of her hair—it could be brushed and neatly oiled. What of her clothes—one could get new clothes stitched and make her wear them. If adorned with flowers in hair, she would look like a flower. Even if none of these things were there, Chinni was good looking. Pleasant features with sparkling eyes!

Now and then a car or lorry was passing by. From the village, the cattleherds were noisily walking away, swinging their staffs. Occasionally, a fierce wind blew.

Onto the road, right in front of Chinni emerged a boy from the village on the right, eating a plantain. In his left hand, there was another. He was biting, licking and nibbling it alternatively.

Chinni sighted him, her mouth watering. Her eyes sparkled with hope. She watched him intently. As if the plantain would be done and over if he ate it, as if it were impossible not to eat, he was pecking at it and slowly eating.

Chinni came to her feet. She slowly dragged her feet across the road and reached him. That boy did not move nor did he stop. He kept eating. Whether he was really eating, or merely licking or nibbling or simply taking it to his mouth, the plantain did not seem to peter out. His mouth did not stop champing.

Chinni looked into the boy's face. He returned the glance. She kept on staring. He too did not turn his face.Watching the fruit in his mouth, the fruit in his hand, turning her glance from his mouth to hand, hand to mouth, looking straight into his eyes, she was begging him wordlessly. He turned his face as if he did not get the message.

"Couldn't you give me some?" Chinni asked.

The boy did not heed.

"Give me a little of it!"

"What's that?" he drawled.

"A little?" She requested.

"No — don't I need — I won't." he said.

"A little, a wee bit."

"No."

"A little."

"I won't, I say."

"As much as an ant's head."

"No!"

Chinni's mouth watered, eyes filled. Her heart turned into water. A wave of misery welled up in her. She collected her spirit, stretched out her hand and tried to snatch the plantain from him like an eagle. Like the mother hen that protects the chicks, he shielded and saved the plantain and dashed into the village on the right. Trying to pursue him, she stumbled forward on the cement road, grazed her elbow, and her forehead was streaked with dirt. A bruise on the elbow, tear-filled eyes, soiled forehead smudging the Brahma's[1] writ itself did not allow Chinni to stand there anymore. Returning, she glanced back at the boy. He showed her the plantain as if to offer it to her, but struck out his tongue, and making faces, he walked into the village.

Chinni suppressed her tears, wiped her nose, eyes, forehead and elbow with the edge of her skirt, and sat at the trunk of the tamarind tree, choking her sobs.

It was three days since Chinni had a meal. Along with her, her mother, sister and little brother had nothing to eat. Chinni, her sister and brother together drained the water in the pot to the dregs by daybreak.

Mother was so weak that she did not stir out of her bed. If Father got the day's wages for labour they ate food otherwise they filled their bellies with water. If Father returned home, they at least had water to drink otherwise utter starvation. Father had not come home for the last three days.

That night her belly smouldered sleeplessly like a haystack in which an ember fell accidentally. Chinni felt death would rather be a relief than suffering an empty stomach in monsoon.

At one time whenever Chinni felt pangs of hunger during the night, she also felt happy in waiting for the day with the hope it would bring food. But at the dawn of the day before yesterday her hunger found no relief. Yesterday saw the sunlight. Hunger stayed on. That morning the day broke. Her hunger intensified. When the day was about to break again, Chinni felt more miserable than happy. Chinni could not bear to give hunger an irrevocable victory.

When she lay curled up in hunger last night, it rained all over the hut like curse on a poor man. With wet mat, the rag covering her being wet, with gnawing hunger and shivering cold, she held sleep secure in the fist, lay tightly bundled up until dawn, came out early in the morning and felt miserable when her emaciated belly was visible to everyone in the hamlet.

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[1] The Hindu God, believed to be the creator of the world

Drawing her arms and legs against her empty belly, with her cold body and wet clothes, she sat under the tamarind tree with aching heart. The sun had not yet risen. If he came out, he was afraid he might have to give witness to the vagaries of fate as a natural witness of fate. The huge cloud on the hill sat smug without lifting an eyelid like the wealth of a rich man, as if hesitating to shower, afraid of being lessened, melted or erased.

"You Chinni!" A harsh voice.

Chinni looked up. In front of her the brother of the fellow who ate the plantain.

Chinni stood frightened.

"Can't you reply, waif?" he glared at her.

She muttered, "What's it?"

"Have you snatched the fruit from him?"

"Naa."

"Tell the truth!"

"Naa."

"If you lie, I'll squeeze your cheeks."

"Naaa!"

"Chchi!" the brother snarled at her. "How dare you harass the boy?" His face turned livid in fury. A beggarly bitch-ruffian." He abused her.

Chinni was about to break into tears.

"Yourself!"

"How dare you? What do you mean by 'yourself'? Say it again, I'll slap you hard."

"Yourself." She uttered the word again.

He kept his word as if he would otherwise lose his claim to Harischandra's lineage. He hit her furiously, on her cheek.

A little girl, her little belly fastened against her backbone after suffering gnawing hunger for days. Weakened body. Chinni fell to ground in one swoop and was hurt by the earth too. If she cried out 'Amma', Mother could not hear. Even if she had heard, she could not come. Even if she were to come, she would not say anything to him. Never any question of hitting him back. If she were to hit, it would be a great humiliation only to her. Father was not at home. So he would not come. So the boy's brother had no trouble there. He went away without getting into any hazard.

Chinni felt an ache in her belly as if her guts were curled up. She could not even muster enough energy to get up from where she fell. He did her a service by slapping her hard enough to make her forget the hunger, which gripped her like *Sani*[2] and had been haunting her like ghost for the last three days. With that stroke, her belly filled up and hunger abated.

Breeze whipped slightly. A drizzle. A shower. But the cloud on the hill had not moved, like a shopkeeper sitting tight in front of his cash-box. No raindrops under the tamarind tree.

That night the rain had washed the road clean and it was not dirtied again. Due to the rain water, the earth from the ploughs eroded whereas the protruding stones looked like teeth, made visible when the earth leered.

Raindrops slid and fell now and then like the water dribbling from the just washed hair. The bell from the Higher Elementary School beside the village rang urgently. Chinni looked bewildered, affected by hunger and cold at a father beating his toddler son, taking him along to school.

Her father was not at home. On the trunk road, up to a twenty five kilometre stretch, the streams and rivulets were breached at several places by floods. To clear the way for traffic, the road had to be repaired at once. When the *Maistre*[3] was searching for the coolies, Father had gone along with him three days back, and did not return.

Chinni did not know whether the road was repaired and when Father would return home. Like a mad man, a drunken man, like a possessed man, Chinni was wobbling, leaning to a side and swooning.

A gust of gale was slashing her back. Hunger was scorching her guts.

Thinking of the bruise on elbow, the slap on cheek, the mud on forehead was driving Chinni to a frenzy. More than the injuries, the way she earned them brought tears to her eyes.

It stopped raining as if it had no more energy to shower or drizzle like the swollen eyes, emptied of all tears after persistent sobbing. The rain that had fallen on the trees the previous night was beaten up, its heart torn open on thorns, its back lashed on the stones, and sliding and groaning it moved on.

The road looked washed and wiped clean. The wetness was drying up. The roadside wild shrubs and thickets caught leaves, bits of papers and other waste, and appeared muddy with layers of dirt. At the side of it, the water slid over the sandy soil, leaving behind stripes, which looked undulating like an emaciated man's ribs.

By the time Sister and Brother came the tears were not visible in Chinni's eyes. Eyes turned into mirages. Like the water in wells during the summer they dried up.

"Why are you like this?"

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[2] The planet Saturn, supposed to have evil influence on human beings

[3] The head workman

Sister looked curiously over her muddied body.

Chinni kept her silence.

"Chai! Can't you talk? Have you heard me?"

Chinni did not reply.

Big Sister looked into her face intently. The younger sister lowered her head.

Brother held her shoulder and shook her. His fingers were tender and glistened smooth like fresh lady's fingers.

The clothes of Brother and Sister were also worn and patched over. Their hair looked dry lacking any oil. Water dripped from their heads and cheeks. The little fellow was shivering in cold.

"Our mother is groaning. She has been calling out 'Chinni, Chinni'. Come, let us go home."

When she heard the word 'Mother', Chinni began shaking. She felt like crying, thinking of her sick Mother unable to move out of bed. She had no food. Neither had mother. She could move about. Mother could not. She herself was much better. Mother in a worse condition. Chinni could not bear to see Mother's pain. Seeing, she could not restrain herself from breaking out. No more energy to cry. A damp pull in the heart. Eyes dry. Drops from the head trickled down her cheeks to disappear in the lips. Pushing up her hair with both hands, she glanced at Brother and Sister by turns.

Big Sister was ten. She helped Mother in household chores. When Mother fell ill, Sister had recently begun doing all her work. She bathed her younger brother and her, wiped their bodies, put fresh clothes on them, if they were any, gave them food, if there were any. Big Sister liked Chinni immensely.

Whatever eats she bought, she shared with them. After giving them both what she had, she would sometimes go around the whole day chewing her empty mouth. If a handful of rice was left at the bottom of the pot. Sister would quietly give it off to her and Brother.

On the night of the day Father left home for work, Mother gave all the rice to Sister without keeping anything for herself. Sister in turn gave the whole of it to her and Brother. Even she did not feel like eating. She pitied her brother. A few mouthfuls given to him, he ate off greedily. It was over even before his little belly filled.

Brother had rice, drank water, and cuddling Mother he slept warmly in her bed. Sister and she went to bed but could not sleep because Father was away. Mother said to Sister, "See the little one has also grown big like you. Have you seen her giving off food to her little brother without having anything herself. Whatever it is! Doesn't really matter whether we have something to eat or drink, your affection for each other is more than enough."

When she heard them, Chinni felt happy but hunger was not much conducive to happiness. Sister and Mother fell asleep but Chinni could not sleep. Spotting the eyes of a cat in the dark, Chinni closed her eyes tightly, and did not open her eyes until daybreak.

Brother was a silly, little fellow. Could not play a single game. He could not even hop properly. Hardly two dozen words came out of his mouth in the whole day. Before words, dribble drooled from his mouth. Hardly three, he was!

He would not stir out of the house unless accompanied by her and Sister. His tottering gait was cute to look at. His words too, lisping and stuttering, were quite endearing.

Hotel-owner Sankarayah liked him very much. If there was nothing to eat at home, Brother crept to Sankarayah like an ant and caught hold of his little finger. Sankarayah knew that language. Brother's belly would then fill.

The little fellow did not know what hunger was since the last three days. Mother and Sister could silently bear it even if they had nothing to eat. Only she could not endure hunger. Nor was there anyone to feed her.

Sankarayah's hotel was a shanty. He was feeding people since he himself had nothing to eat. She started for his hotel yesterday along with Brother. But on second thoughts, she held herself back. If Sankarayah had not enough to feed them both, he would not feed Brother also, thinking that giving food to only one of the two children would be improper.

She did not know what Brother ate there, he came out, wiped his mouth, walked straight up to Chinni, and without asking her whether she ate or not, pulling her skirt, drooling at his mouth, opening and closing his eyes, when he was lisping "Let us play!" she could not hold back her tears. She lifted him up and wept piteously.

Playing with the muddy water in the puddles on the road, a jeep dashed by. The mud splashed their clothes. Sister cleaned herself and Brother. Chinni sat without bothering to wipe off the mud.

"Hey come home Chinni!" Sister called.

"Come *leus gu*!" lisped Brother.

Chinni did not move.

"Come, let us go," Sister held her right arm begging. "Won't you come," Brother said twisting his mouth all over and holding her left hand. "Come, get up," both of them called.

Chinni did not move.

"Naa."

Sister and Brother did not leave her hands, "Come, get up."

"I'll stay here. You go away, Akka, Go," Chinni sat immovable.

"Mother is crying," Sister said.

"Come sister, let us go home."

"I won't come now — later — you go."

When she saw Sister and Brother, Chinni remembered Mother and Father. Sister resembled Father a lot. But Father liked herself a lot. Whenever he got flowers home, he handed them only to herself. He slept, patting her. If she were not at home, he would not eat.

Recalling how he would puff up his chest to say "My little daughter is my fortune," brought ambrosia-like-wetness to Chinni's dry lips. She moved around, being carried on his shoulders rather than walk.

If she could not sleep in the nights. Father used to lay her on his chest and pat her to sleep. She grew up, being close to Father's heart, listening to its beat, and being nourished on it.

If Father was at home, there would be food. She would not feel so hungry really if he were around. Without Father, without food, in rains, in the cold, without clothes, without a proper house, unable to see Mother's suffering, Chinni felt hunger spreading its thousand tongues like a cobra in her belly, body, eyes, arms, legs, in every drop of her blood, at every root of her hair and in every sweat gland of hers.

Brother resembled Mother completely. In his features, he was a mere copy of her. Like love in Mother's eyes, his hand was on her shoulder. Brother could not bear to see Chinni crying. He would wipe her tears away with his little hands.

Mother, however weak and sickly she was, used to say. "You play, I'll do it," and would attend to chores. Mother could not bear to see her being put to hardship. She would be pained to see even an ant biting her.

Mother took her words seriously. If she wanted to go anywhere, she would ask Chinni, "Shall I go?" and Mother left only when she said, "Yes! Go." If it were a 'no' she would not go.

When Chinni was a baby in the cradle one day Mother was about to step out of the house to keep the big pot in the yard. Chinni began wailing loudly as if a disaster struck her home. About to go out, Mother turned back, approached the cradle with a kerosene lamp and searched in the cradle only to find nothing. When she tried to step out again, Chinni resumed crying even more loudly as if her life was in danger. Mother rummaged the cradle all over again for an ant or an insect.

She kept quiet when Mother was at the cradle and began crying out loudly if she tried to walk away. Thinking that Chinni took fright for some reason, Mother did not move from the place. When Father, who had just come back from fields, tried to move something lying at the threshold with his staff, it turned out to be a snake. That night Father killed the snake before stepping into the house.

Mother was amazed, looking at the dead snake. She wept loudly, saying that her little child gave her life a new lease literally. From the day onwards Mother stopped doing whatever Chinni objected to.

It stopped raining. The sky had not yet cleared. On the road glistened patches of wetness like the oiled betel leaf. A gust of wind was mustering up to raid the bones of one's chest. From the swaying trees, drops of water fell now and then.

A ten-year old girl was returning home from school. Flowers in her hair. Silk blouse. Silk skirt. Even if there was no need, full skirt reaching her calves. Two plaits. Leaping in the air slightly like a whip with several lashes.

Like her plaits, arms; like her arms, legs; like her legs, gait was sprightly. Her head and eyes bubbling with liveliness. Her whole body betrayed a wave of vivacity. In her belly, in her guts food was being digested energetically.

That girl's was the same age as her sister's. She glanced back and forth from Sister to that girl. Observed her head, body, legs, arms, clothes, flowers and books. Seeing her books, Chinni broke out crying.

"What is it? What's it?" Sister asked.

"What sister? What?" Brother asked.

"Nothing." Chinni replied

Brother and Sister did not talk again. They stood passing glances at each other. Chinni wiped her eyes.

A bus came from the town. Ranga Sami's daughter got down. She took her son who had fever to the government hospital in town and returned after a week.

Seeing his daughter get out of the bus, Ranga Sami approached. He hastened, stumbling on the way, along with his son-in-law who excessively pampered his son.

While the children were playing happily on the road, Big Sister walked Brother home. The children were hurling a dead snake again and again into the air and harassing it. Chinni watched the snake. The snake had been soaked to the skin in the rain, and it died. For the children of labourers, that scene was a delightful one.

They stoned the dead snake and killed it again. Beating it with staffs, they killed it. Without approaching, from a distance they did it. When they knew it was dead, they hurled it again and again into air and killed it.

The children went on leaping in joy. A great hullabaloo. From one side of the road to the other, a crowd of children were rushing forward and surging ahead, jostling each other to see what it was.

Meanwhile someone fetched dry wood. Another got a matchbox.

Someone lit it and made fire. The future citizens of India were intent on performing rituals to the dead snake.

Chinni sat at the trunk of the tamarind tree, watching them. There a snake burning! Here a frog fastened to the ground. The smoke from the burning snake was reaching the sky above the tall building. Watching the huts, the frog was flattened on the earth. A frog and a snake. "If you ask the snake to bite, the frog gets angry; if you ask him to leave, the snake gets angry," Chinni remembered the proverb Mother would often repeat.

Sister and Brother joined the future citizens. They were children no more. A pandemonium! Wild cries!

Chinni was reluctant to get up and stir from the place. Stretching her legs forward, she leaned back against the tamarind tree. Her eyes were filled with the smoke from the snake. She could not see the frog but saw the lorry.

Almost a year back, children were playing on that road, running from one tree to the other. Some adults scolded them but they did not stop playing.

They all cheered Chinni, saying only she could go to the other side, touch the tree and come back before the lorry approached, only Chinni had guts and spirit to do it.

Chinni dashed off across the road, touched the tree and turning back, was running fast. She did not see how close the lorry came.

The children were shrieking confused. She did not know whether it was out of delight that she returned before the lorry or whether it was a warning that the lorry was closing on, whether it was out of joy or fear. A big shriek she heard. That's the last she heard anything.

When Chinni opened her eyes, the house in commotion turned silent. When she saw Mother and Father, Chinni felt like crying. When she heard that she was out of danger, lost lot of blood, Chinni felt happy unknowingly.

Until Chinni came to, the lorry owner waited there. When she regained consciousness, he felt relieved as if he had off-loaded a full lorry, and leaving a sigh of relief, he drove away.

From that day onwards the lorry owner, deciding by himself, paid Chinni's folks hundred rupees a month for four months, and for six months he gave her food as compensation.

In those days Chinni seemed to have enjoyed heavenly pleasures lying in her simple cot, woven in jute. When she woke up, someone or the other served her and looked after her. They ate after she ate.

Hundred rupees a month for her sake! More than what Father and Mother earned. This money was a symbol of the union of darkness and light when the lamp of her breath flickered terribly. This money was a wild flower sprouted on the grave. This money was the price, assessed for the measure of the earth, which mingled with human blood. This money was the flag that showed the nobility of a rich man and the lowness of a poor man.

The parents who would have loved the child even without this money loved her all the more due to this money. This money brought only happiness to them. Chinni felt proud that she earned all this money, and that she repaid her parents' debt and did a service to them.

In Chinni's view, eating food meant pouring sambar in a fistful of rice they had and drinking it. It was the most desirable thing in what they ate. She never knew that there could be any other food. Nor did she know that bread and eggs were equal to her usual meal. Nor did she know that bread and butter, bread and jam were such delicacies. When she tasted the food the lorry owner brought from the town, she realized how innocent she had been.

When she was eating bread and eggs, her tongue felt like the garden luxuriant in blossoming colourful flowers because of the new pleasant taste. While she ate bread and butter, she felt as if she were sliding a hand over an iron column, gliding a leg over the slush, as if an ice cream were slipping from her hand and as if her body turned soft like cotton-wool. When the bread and jam slipped down her gullet, it was sweet and sour, soft and hard, and it glided down twisting coyly.

When she removed the skin and gulped the grapes, they slithered through her gullet, guts, belly and inner parts as a stone thrown into the well disappears slowly in the sunlight. When an orange or a sweet lime was peeled, with its seeds removed and the rest was put in the mouth, it watered swelling like a spring, spreading pleasant taste all over the throat. An apple, eaten in the same way tasted like cream. No need to chew, no need to bite, no work for the teeth. It melted by the warmth of the tongue and slipped down the gullet. When she ate bananas of various varieties, centuries of hunger seemed to have disappeared.

When she put a piece of jilebi[4] in her mouth, water welled up sweetly and spread all over. When she champed mysorepak[5], each tooth yawned as if it had witnessed the great revelation. While she ate a laddu[6], it tasted like ambrosia, fallen from the crumbling foundations of heaven itself. When she put a scoopful of boondi[7] into her mouth, a smug feeling spread in every nerve of hers.

At one time eating biscuits meant a good exercise for the teeth. The other day, when her aunt put a piece of biscuit on her tongue, and she looked bewildered unable to make out where it had gone. Varieties of biscuits—sweetish, saltish, pungent and hot—Chinni soon gathered that man scooped

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[4,5,6] Different kinds of sweets made of sugar, rice and dal flour and ghee

[7] Deep fried crispy snack

out all the tastes God created and filled the biscuits with them.

Whatever was left after Chinni ate, the others in the house ate. It was a stroke of good fortune that in Chinni's house they were able to eat such good food and that too for six months.

Everyday Chinni stood waiting for the lorry on the road, leaped in joy when the lorry came and while she was taking home the food given by the owner or the driver, she saw fortune in the lorry. God in the owner and the affection of Mother and Father in the arrival of the lorry and all this made her happy.

After six months when the gash on her forehead cured and disappeared, even when the lorry came, fruits did not come. Even if the owner smiled, he did not give sweets. When he stopped the lorry, enquired "Are you well?" and pushed off, she felt miserable and cried each time. Gradually, they even ceased to stop the lorry.

To eat red chilli pickle with the palate that tasted bread, to drink rasam or other sour things with the gullet that swallowed fruit juices, to eat ordinary sambar and rice with the tongue that tasted sweets, her stomach revolted. Hunger was a gift given by God. Gradually the sick feeling fled, accosted by hunger. Chinni got used to her earlier food. But at times she craved for the food, she ate a while ago.

Chinni waited for the lorry to stop for the last six months and was disappointed. Why did the lorry owner feed her so well for such a long time? Why did he stop it suddenly? She tried hard to think and find the answers but she could not even get a clue.

But how would she get that chance to get all that food again and she kept thinking. For six months, that question churned over in her little brain. What could she do?

Suddenly that night the answer flashed across her mind like the sun in the sky as hunger burned her belly, the cold broke her skin, when the house shook due to rains, when Mother groaned and Father was away.

That night sleep eluded Chinni. She was more anxious for the daybreak than the sun. She got up in thinning darkness. She reached the road, looked and went back home at least ten times. At last she landed up under the tamarind tree and sat there since nine O' clock.

The sun seemed to be still snoring under a tightly wrapped blanket. Shrivelled by the cold, hiding and flitting behind the hilltop, the cloud came out with small clouds trailing behind it like a recruiting officer. The wind gushed fiercely and was pushing out the clouds. Suddenly it began to rain. The raindrops fell like well-aimed bullet shots.

Chinni did not stir. Even when the slanting rain was piercing her body, she did not stir. The children playing on the road ran home. In the village on the right except for the roar of the rain not a mouse stirred. In the hamlet on the left, the rain seemed vengeful. Deserted as far as the eye could see. Not a soul to be seen.

Rain all around! On the hill, on the fields, on the houses, on the trees, on the road, rain all over. It rained like the universal truth. As the sky yeaned rains, the earth delivered cold. This cold and this rain was a companion to Chinni.

Due to the fallen water drops, the leaves turned heavy, the branches grew heavier and the trees, which hung their heads, looked like a poor man's despair. The haystack, soaked wet and shrivelled by the rain, looked like a starved belly.

Chinni watched the road intently. When she saw the lorry coming like the sun breaking over the clouds in the morning, Chinni's joy was unrestrained. The same lorry. That lorry had become quite familiar to her during the year. When that lorry showed up, every drop of blood in her body was breaking out and leaping out.

That lorry – like the owner's goodness – was approaching. Looked like mother's love. Like God's kindness coming face to face. It came closer like bread, fruit, laddu, and biscuit, like food that filled an empty belly.

Chinni came to her feet. The lorry was closing in on her instant by instant. Her hope grew by seconds. Her blood surged within her. Her hunger abated.

The lorry was moving forward heavily. The rain was lashing the earth. From the sky to the earth a veil of dimness. The village was silent in the day. Not a stirring of the soul.

The lorry came close, very close. Chinni ran across the road. Until then the driver did not see Chinni. Then he saw. Saw Chinni smiling. When he recognized Chinni's face, he grew long-faced.

The cheroot in the owners hand saw Chinni, smiling Chinni, Chinni running in front of the lorry, slipped and fell down.

Chinni kept smiling. No happiness in that smile. There was despair in it. Hunger in it. Pain in it. No life in that smile. No radiance. That smile was not a smile. In that smile there was sorrow. Misery. Despair. Prayer. Request and importuning.

It was the driver's habit to smile back. He did not. It was a ritual with the owner to respond to her smile with a smile. He did not do it then.

The drivers hands shook, legs shook. The fully laden lorry surged forward. It kept raining. The road was slippery. The driver pressed the break. The lorry did not stop. The break did not respond. No sign of the lorry stopping. They looked on helplessly.

In front of the eyes Chinni. Pretty Chinni. Smart Chinni. Chinni who narrowly escaped death. Chinni whom he liked very much.

The owner's heart trembled in fear. His nerves stretched as if to crack. His arms and legs, out of his control.

The driver's hands and legs acted smartly and he suddenly turned the steering. The lorry turned aside but did not stop.

Chinni saw it. When she saw the ambrosia-like lorry and the food-like lorry escaping, she could not bear it. Chinni turned in the same direction the lorry turned. She moved where it moved. She stood in front of it, obstructing.

"Cinna!'

Cried the driver. He turned the steering. The lorry got on to the road again. He pressed the break forcefully. With a screech like the groaning of an old man, the lorry was stopping. Chinni was not in sight.

Chinni went on staring. The lorry in front of her. She fell to the side of the road last time. Now she fell in the middle of the road. Last time she fell to the side of the lorry. Now she fell in front of the lorry. The lorry did not stop. She thought she was losing consciousness. She did.

Something hit her belly. Chinni might take it to be the hand of mother or father. If she came to, she might think she would find mother or father in front of her. She might expect her mother to caress her hungry belly.

Chinni no longer knew anything. The lorry was there. The road was there. Chinni was on it. The lorry at last came to a halt. It moved while stopping. Stopped while moving.

The front wheel felt something like a stone obstructing which it climbed up and down. The minute the lorry stopped the driver and the owner leaped out of it on either side.

Chinni was nowhere around. She was not to be seen. From under the lorry, the blood mingled with rain water flowed red into the road-side ditch.

In the middle of the road, with the belly ripped open, the blood splattered over, with the legs fastened to the road, flattened like pancakes, a bull frog. A big bellowing frog. One that cried, leapt, jumped, thought, wept, laughed and one which was distressed by hunger. And one, who, with its stomach ripped open, moved away from hunger.

Translated from Telugu by C.L.L. Jayaprada ☐

Mourning

Maheep Singh

Glued to the telephone Sagarji thought for a while. Picking up the diary he began turning over the pages unable to decide where to begin from. Realising that trying at random might result in some people being totally forgotten, he thought it would be proper if he began in the alphabetical order. Opening the first page of his diary he found Amarnathji's name as the first entry under 'A'. He considered it to be an important name. Though not a politician; he has status in the society. Being a rich person, he is much sought after by a number of schools and organisations.

He dialled the number, "Could I speak to Amarnathji?" There was prompt reply, "Yes, speaking."

"Sir, Good morning, Sagar speaking. Sir...sorry for bothering you so early in the morning...my Pitaji passed away....just a few hours ago...he had a stroke...no, no... never...never had he suffered from any complaint of such kind....age? Only seventy two...and he was enjoying perfectly good health. Sir...he used to go for a walk at four every morning... he felt a little uneasy when he returned home this morning....I was fast asleep as you know the party meeting dragged past midnight...yes, the Home Minister had convened it... to apprise about the state in which the country finds herself in... Mataji woke me up and before I could summon a doctor, he had breathed his last....(voice chokes)....he was my sheet anchor....All my public accomplishments...I owe to him....I feel orphaned....and miserable....at Nigambodh Ghat....you would be reaching by five in the evening...so kind of you. Sir...I always relied on you for support....O.K., O.K...." Sagarji had a look at his wrist watch...it took almost five to seven minutes in informing just one person...can't be helped, after all, you can't escape saying few irrelevant things as well. He looked immediately at the next entry: Amarjeet Singhji. He must also be informed…he is a renowned transporter—an extremely useful person during electioneering. He dialled the number and as luck would have it, Amarjeet Singhji was on the line. A similar conversation followed. And in addition, Amarjeet Singhji enquired, "Sagarji, what arrangements have you made for carrying the body to Nigambodh?"

"Managed a van."

"How about members of family...reaching the cremation ground...?" Showing much concern Amarjeet Singhji asked.

"We have two or three vehicles, but…"

"Don't worry...I'll send a mini-bus that can carry twenty to thirty persons…"

Sagarji beamed...."That would be nice Amarjeet Singhji...I was worried....how to take so many people to the cremation ground in so ruthless a summer..."

Placing the receiver on the cradle he thought.... "Yes, Amarjeet Singhji is really a dependable person in an hour of need. After all, I too have helped him on a number of occasions." He recalled the manipulations he had to negotiate in helping him get All India permit for his tourist buses. Had he not wooed the Transport Minister to his side it would have been a lost deal altogether. Then, he scanned the next few names...Anees Ahmed, Anil Arora, Anoop Singh....He realised that following this procedure would be quite time-consuming and by that time many would be leaving their houses for their respective places of work....persons whose names begin with M,R,S....and in that case it would be impossible to locate them. It would be wiser that VIPs are not seen at the cremation ground!

Sagarji had to turn a few pages while recollecting who all the VIPs were. The name he could recall was of the Transport Minister. When he dialled the number, an unfamiliar voice was heard... "hello...."

"Is it Transport Ministerji's home?"

"Yes...."

"This is Sagar... S.P.Sagar...May I know who I am speaking to...?"

"I am Mantriji's P.A... Sharma."

Sagarji made his tone turn meek, "Sharmaji..... seems you could not recognise me…I am S.P. Sagar...you must have seen me with Mantriji several times…I am convenor of the young entrepreneurs cell of our party...you might recall the inauguration ceremony last month of Amarjeet Singh & Co's show-room…Yes, Mantriji had graced the occasion…probably you had not accompanied Mantriji that time… some other P.A….anyway, you definitely must have seen me quite close to Mantriji on several occasions...please connect me to Mantriji...I have an urgent matter..."

Holding the receiver in one hand, Sagarji kept waiting as there was no response from the other end...he was getting irritated. He thought of approaching at least two or three ministers to reach for the funeral or else it would become so embarrassing...even humiliating...All of sudden, Sarupchand's, his bitterest enemy's, face flashed before his eyes.... his mother had died a few months ago...what a crowd had swelled that day. Several heavy-weights of the party had gathered...even a few leaders of opposition had also obliged...A sizeable crowd of writers and journalists had also thronged...what a pride had lit up Sarupchand's eyes when a white Ambassador car drove in and two persons carrying a big wreath alighted from it...How distinguished had people felt when it became known that the Prime Minister sent those floral tributes for Sarupchandji's mother.

Sagarji became attentive, all of a sudden, when he heard Mantriji's voice from the other end. For a few seconds he was almost dumbfounded.... "Oh...Mantriji...? You are having your breakfast, sir...? So sorry for the inconvenience…" His voice choked as he communicated about the bolt from the blue that had befallen him at the sad demise of his father…His face reflected the profound sorrow the Mantriji was expressing.

Tears welled up in his eyes. Holding the receiver in one hand and handkerchief in another, he began wiping his face while speaking...." I shall feel much consoled sir, if you could spare a few minutes for me....it would give me a lot of solace...you always had been so kind and considerate towards me...."

Putting down the receiver he heaved a sigh of relief, "So at least one minister is certain to come." The speed of turning the pages of telephone diary and dialling the numbers caught momentum. Frequent look at the clock on the wall sparked a kind of impetuousness.

"Stop this dialling now," shouted his irritated wife standing close to him, "A lot of arrangements for Pitaji's funeral are to be made and you have tied yourself to this damn telephone."

He looked towards her in a fury, almost about to retort what a fool she was…she doesn't realise how important my endeavours have been....These are only few occasions when you are able to establish public contacts which pay off. Gripping her hand in his both palms and pressing it he realised that to establish a rapport with one's own wife is as difficult as developing contacts with VIPs or with thousands of people.

"Sheelji," summoning all the tested shrewdness at his command, he assured her, "don't worry at all...everything is being managed...what I have been doing all the while is extremely important. You had been to Sarupchand's mother's funeral, hadn't you? How many persons had flocked… persons enjoying status had thronged at the cremation grounds... afterall, we must also ensure our status in the society."

Melted completely, she replied, "It's all right...but if the body is to be taken out for cremation before noon, everything will have to be arranged immediately...without delay....where do we have the time?"

"See," pondering over the matter Sagarji said, "we cannot proceed before noon....people wouldn't know. Had Pitaji died in the evening, I would have informed about it to the morning dailies and everyone would have known by now, as well as about the place and timings of the cremation....but Pitaji died this morning...I have informed the evening bulletins...but what can be achieved through the morning dailies can hardly be done through evening bulletins....the trouble is that people don't take the eveningers seriously..."

His wife's brother was taking care of funeral arrangements as his three sons were too young to manage the affairs—the eldest one was hardly ten. The three kids were so attached to their uncle that they follow him every nook and corner porroting 'Mamaji-mamaji'.

"Kirpal," Sagarji summoned him when he noticed him passing by.

"Yes, Jeejaji...." there was a lot of confusion and impetuousness in his behaviour.

"See dear! The entire show is your responsibility. I don't know what is to be done on such an occasion... be sure that there is nothing lacking or missing lest people should make fun of us."

"No problem at all...rest assured Jeejaji....there shall be no lacunae." Turning towards Sheel he said, "Didi, please listen for a while."

While dialling, Sagarji noticed that Sheel and Kirpal were whispering over some matter and Sheel picked her wallet from her blouse.

The number that Sagarji had dialled was engaged everytime he tried, therefore, he began trying other numbers. He saw Sheel giving a few hundred rupee notes to Kirpal. He felt very much disturbed feeling that Kirpal would pocket a few hundreds out of those.

Having dialled a couple of numbers Sagarji stood up. Thinking about something he went inside. The dead body was wrapped in a white sheet. His mother, alongwith a few relatives sat beside it—gloom stricken on her face. A priest was chanting lines from some sacred text. He sat near the feet—clasping them with his hands he bowed down and burst into tears. People who sat nearby came closer as he felt several people patting his back.

The crowd at the Nigambodh Ghat was quite considerable. He, with his moist and swollen eyes and bowing to everyone with folded hands, listened to the condolence offered by the mourners present. His eyes would automatically rise as soon as someone arrived.

He made a mental tally of the gathering that had assembled. Only a few local office-bearers of the party had arrived; but the State Executive—President, vice-president, general secretaries, were yet to arrive. A few ex-corporators of the municipal corporation could also be spotted here and there; but the Central High Command had not obliged—none from the party or the government had come.

People were expressing their condolence and he was thanking them profusely displaying humility though he felt extremely dejected. Close relatives were picking logs and the priest was arranging them on the pyre. His elder brother had arrived by noon, hence the responsibility to kindle the pyre and offer the Mukhagni passed on to the brother. Kirpal was managing the whole affair running from one place to another.

Then all of a sudden a face shone from among the crowd. Sagarji saw Anandji, the deputy minister, arriving, carrying a garland of roses. His ashen face lit up as he rushed forward to receive him. Anandji stood still when he saw Sagarji approaching. Spitting the paan masala out he embraced Sagarji in a tight clasp.

"I'm greatly shocked to learn of Pitaji's death, Sagarji."

"As the Lord hath ordained...." Sagarji replied in a voice choked with emotions. Then he led the deputy minister to the bier. He placed a wreath on it and folded both the hands as a mark of respect.

It was the fourth day. The elders of the house were to collect ashes from the cremation ground. It was decided that a van would take them to Haridwar for immersion of ashes in the Ganga. He was much depressed for the last two days. Nothing could console him. He hadn't even eaten properly. Sheel had tried to comfort him. "Nobody's parents live for ever...one shouldn't lose heart...Pitaji left a happy and prosperous family behind him having fully discharged all his responsibilities...you must summon courage and fortitude...this alone will give peace to his soul."

But nothing could dispel Sagarji's dejection. The cremation ground often flashed in his vision...only one deputy minister from the Union Cabinet! What happened to the cabinet minister? He had assured him of his presence there...who cares for one's promises these days...but...if he was unable to come, he should have deputed his P.A. with a garland at least....and the turn out, the number was much smaller than he expected. A crowd of one thousand and five hundred would have been just enough and respectable but there were hardly a few hundreds, and most of them were people from his own locality. What about the VIPs? Barely one or two. Had Anandji not obliged, the entire show would have been a fiasco.

The van carrying ashes left for Haridwar. Visitors who had arrived for expressing their condolence also departed. Silence reigned supreme all over the house. Mother forlorn and dejected, was seated in a corner. Sheel was busy in the kitchen and the children had gone to bed after having their meals.

Sagarji was staring blankly towards Mataji. He sensed that she too wouldn't survive long... and all of a sudden, a wave of imagination swept him off the shore. He began visualising his mother's bier reaching the cremation ground. The Premier and his cabinet colleagues arrive and the whole cremation ground present a medley of heads and heads all round... and a large car drives in... the President's ADCs in their military uniforms carrying a huge wreath alight...walking down the distance they present a salute and place the wreath on the bier.

Sagarji kept gazing at his mother. Rising from his seat, he reached her. Sitting by her side he burst into tears.

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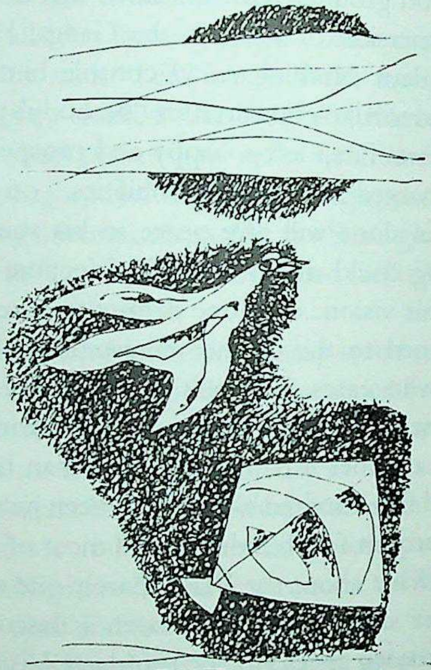

The Other Draupadi

Virendra Mehndirutta

"Sahibji!"

As I lifted my eyes from the book, I saw Draupadi standing in front of me. Dark skin, curly hair, dirty crumpled clothes, a broom in her hand. Draupadi is the name of our sweeper but I like to call her by her name instead of the customary jamadarin.

"Sahibji, my little daughter is ill for the last seven days," she was saying. "The hospital treatment is not doing her any good. If I could get five rupees, I could show her to some proper doctor."

"Go, ask bibiji," I said.

"Bibiji has gone to the market. And she is also angry with me. If you are kind enough, I shall ever remain indebted."

It appeared odd to me that she could expect a favour from me even when my wife was not happy with her. I felt somehow guilty, as if Draupadi had caught me red handed.

Often my eyes had probed the contours of her healthy body peeping out of her tattered old shirt. Evidently Draupadi must have felt the contact of my glances and now wanted to exploit my weakness. And I had taken her to be a dumb illiterate villager! She was working in several homes, came in contact with all sorts of people and knew the ways of the world. Apparently, that was why she had chosen to come to me for help when my wife was not at home!

"Okay, here's five rupees", I said." But I'm sure even bibiji wouldn't have refused for your child's treatment."

These words sounded rather strange, as if I was giving an explanation to myself for offering her the money.

Kamla often used to complain about Draupadi: "I am fed up with this sweeper. She invariably falls sick whenever there is a little extra work. She has produced six children in the last six years and now the seventh is on the way. She barely works for seven months but expects to be paid full wages for the whole year."

It was a fact that Draupadi remained perpetually pregnant. That's why the contours and colours of her body kept changing from month to month. Beginning with yellow like turmeric, then turning to a shining glow of motherhood. And then the ugly pot-belly and heavy tired feet, dragging her body covered with thin and torn clothes. During her last pregnancy she had kept coming for work even up to the eighth month to please Kamla. Many times I felt like asking Kamla to let her go but kept quiet lest she taunted me for my over-sympathy for Draupadi.

The same story was being repeated this year too. Draupadi's sixth daughter was not even four months old when her body began to change once again. I had noticed that every childbirth in the past always left Draupadi in a bad shape. Her skin would become darker, her breasts would start sagging and bones would start showing on her face. Perhaps that was only natural when she always had an infant in her lap to feed with no proper nutrition and had to cope with all the work of five or six households. So when her face once again started showing a glow it was a sure sign of yet another pregnancy. I felt quite sorry for her when I saw the same pattern being repeated now for the seventh time.

One day when I was reading the newspaper in the drawing room, I could overhear Kamla talking to Draupadi in the next room. "This time you should go in for an operation," Kamla was saying.

"I wanted to get it done even last time bibiji," Draupadi replied, "but he doesn't agree."

"But why does he not agree?"

"What can I say bibiji! Whenever I mention this, he threatens to beat me."

"But why? What does he say?"

"What is there to say bibiji! We women have no life of our own. Just work hard the whole day and submit to the men during the night. Utter a word and get beaten up!" I closed my newspaper and began listening to their conversation more attentively.

"Does he really beat you?" Kamla asked.

"My whole back is blue with blows. You can look for yourself," Draupadi replied.

"What a brute he is! I shall ask sahib to speak to jamadar."

"Oh no bibiji! Please don't mention anything to sahibji. My man is still better than many others. In our colony several men beat their wives every night. Mata Din actually killed his wife by beating!"

"That's very cruel! How can your men folk be so merciless?"

"They are not merciless. They are just men. And what is a man's worth if he cannot keep his woman under control?"

"But is beating the only way to keep the women under control?"

"I don't know, but they are all the same. I have been suffering these beatings for so long that I've got used to them by now. Getting beaten is the same as eating food every day."

"But you are also working hard to earn money. Then why should you tolerate such barbarity?"

"I have to work to feed my children. When so many people live together some such clashes are inevitable."

I marvelled at the manner in which Draupadi had reconciled with the whole situation. She was willing to go through anything in order to support her children and manage her household. There was no question of protesting or claiming equal rights. It was simply a wholehearted surrender for the sake of other home and children. Nevertheless I thought I would speak to Draupadi's husband. He worked as a sweeper in some government office. Since the office was closed on Sundays, he attended to Draupadi's work in our houses so that she could look after the domestic chores at home. Occasionally, when there was any extra work for Draupadi in any house, he even took leave from office to help her out. Thus both husband and wife worked really hard to earn as much as possible. Looking at the harmonious manner in which they worked outside, one could not imagine that he would be beating his wife every night. But the question as to why he did not agree for Draupadi's operation still remained unanswered. Was it due to some superstition or some other reason? So when he came to work on next Sunday, I could not resist broaching the subject.

"Look jamadar," I said cautiously, "normally I would not interfere in your personal life but in your own interest I would like to speak to you about something." When he looked back at me with a blank expression, I realized my mistake. Perhaps I should have come straight to the point without this clumsy introduction.

"How much do you earn?" I asked.

"Two hundred rupees," he replied casually.

"Six children plus two of you makes eight. And now the ninth is on the way. So for each member you will have not even 25 rupees, which is barely enough only to buy atta! Then how are you able to feed your whole family?"

"We are managing somehow, due to your help and kindness," he replied.

"Maybe, but how long you can continue like this if you go on adding children every year?" I paused for a moment and added, "Why don't you let Draupadi undergo an operation after this delivery?"

"I would have let her have it sahib but... how can I explain? These women have to be kept on the right track by force like cattle. They are just like cattle.

"Like animals? What do you mean?" I asked rather angrily.

"You may not understand sahib but it is quite clear. Our whole life is dirty, like mud. Only yesterday the wife of an old man in our colony ran away with a young labourer. That's why I think it is safer to have a pregnant wife. At least she will not run away with anyone!" he said philosophically. "If these women are not forcibly kept under control, they will keep philandering from house to house."

"Really?"

"You are all noble people. You do not know the ways of the world. It is we who have to carry all the filth of the world on our heads. We know the reality. We have to scavenge all the dirt from house to house. Everybody is not like you. Even if a woman is clean, the world does not leave her alone."

"But Draupadi works only in the mornings so...?"

"Day or night doesn't make any difference to these people here, especially the young men coming from outside."

Without my knowledge, I was enjoying this conversation. Actually, Draupadi's voluptuous body had a kind of attraction, which would be difficult for any young man to resist. Trying to probe further, I enquired, "Did anybody really misbehave with her?"

"Now what can I tell, sahib? There is a strange looking young man staying at the top floor room of bungalow no. 27. Has long hair and is always dressed like a joker. Only last month when Draupadi was cleaning the room one day, he flashed a ten rupees note out of his purse and bolted the door from inside. That day she threatened to create a scene and escaped. But you can never tell about these things. She could have slipped out of greed. Now at least she is still afraid of the consequences but if she undergoes an operation, she would be free to do whatever she likes. The example of our neighbour Manan is before her. Everybody says she is readily available for two rupees."

I felt a sudden jolt, as if my feet had landed in shit. I felt that it was a mistake to meddle in these people's affairs. But then I thought this couldn't be called meddling as I was only trying to help him in his own interest. So I asked again. "Well, if you don't want her to get operated, then why don't you get operated yourself? That should be no problem?"

"For that I am quite ready," he said, "but she wouldn't let me!"

That further confused the whole situation. Why should she object to his operation? Perhaps she might be afraid that he will become weak after the operation. I was curious to know the real reason for her resistance but I thought I should not go too far with my curiosity. It was better to avoid interfering in these people's personal affairs.

After a few days, I was studying alone in my room in the evening while Kamla was away to visit her parents. Suddenly I heard the tinkling of anklets and looked up to find that Draupadi had quietly come in unnoticed. I was surprised to see her decked up in bright salwar kameez with a red dupatta, lipstick on her lips and kajal in her eyes. It was difficult to recognize her in that dress. Moreover evening was not her normal time for working at home. So I asked her with curiosity, "What's the matter Draupadi? Are you celebrating some festival today?"

"No sahibji. But don't these clothes look good on me?"

"Of course they look good. But are you going out somewhere?"

"Oh no!" she replied, twisting her lips and shaking her head in her typical fashion.

Draupadi hesitatingly took two steps forward and said, "You are always so busy. That's why I am afraid to enter your room."

"But why should you be afraid? Did I ever say anything to you?"

"No, you never say anything. That's why I am afraid!"

As I looked at Draupadi's smiling face, I was conscious of a change coming over myself. In Kamla's absence I was feeling more relaxed and was enjoying talking to Draupadi alone. Searching for something to talk about, I asked her, "In how many households do you work?"

"Only five."

" Do you get only ten rupees from each house?"

"No, she replied. "I get ten from some and twenty from others and even thirty from one house."

"Oh, even thirty? Is it a very large house?"

"No, the house is not large, but is occupied by three sahibs and I get ten rupees from each."

"Is there no bibiji there?"

"No. That's why I have to do extra work there."

Now I was beginning to understand the meaning of this "extra work." Suddenly I was reminded of my friend Manmohan. We were both bachelors those days. He used to pay thirty rupees to his maid. He explained that this was the rate for "double cleaning" of body and soul! To keep everything clean, he had kept even a separate cake of Lifebuoy soap in the bathroom. Same was the story of another colleague whose wife used to live in the village. He had also settled a rate with his maid-servant.

"It is a straightforward arrangement," he had explained. "Five rupees for her need and ten for my satisfaction. But I rarely had to pay ten because her need was always more urgent. Either she would have nothing to cook at home or somebody was always sick in the family." As he laughed aloud, his dirty teeth showed out of his distorted ugly face and a trickle of spittle flowed down to his pajamas. I have not been able to forget this repulsive scene till today.

As these memories flashed through my mind in a few seconds, I found Draupadi standing before me. Her head was tilted on one side with a smile, and she was fondly caressing her curly hair. As I looked at her, she swayed her shapely waist from one side to the other and started tidying up her dupatta.

In order to continue the earlier conversation I again asked, "Besides this, you have any other extra income?"

"Where is the scope for any extra income for us?" she replied. "All we can earn is only by working hard with our body."

" Yes, that's right..." I mumbled.

Meanwhile, Draupadi had come quite near my chair and sat down on the floor. She had never come so near to me before.

I could smell the mixed fragrance of cheap hair oil and the odour emanating from the clothes clinging to her body. It was amazing that even after the birth of seven children, the firmness of her body exuded a strange attraction.

Suddenly I was reminded of the unanswered question and asked impulsively, "Draupadi, although it is your personal matter, but I wanted to ask you something."

"Yes, sahibji, what is it?"

I hesitated for a long moment and then said, "Well, what I wanted to know was...why don't you allow your husband to undergo an operation...?"

"You won't understand sahib," she replied with downcast eyes." It's a cruel world. I have to work in several houses, with all sorts of people. Its filthy work and despite all precautions one can get into trouble. If my husband undergoes an operation, won't I face disgrace in the community?" Saying this she caught hold of my feet.

"I badly need twenty five rupees, sahibji. I'll satisfy you fully with my whole body and soul." She rested her face on my knees and started crying.

The mixed smell of her body, clothes and cheap hair oil created a foggy sensation in mind and I couldn't understand what was happening. I lost all power of my faculties and whispered in a trembling voice, "Draupadi!"

Translated from Hindi by Madan M. Mathur

Just Say It

Sitesh Aloke

Kirti was getting late...very late. But Raju nestled up to her and simply refused to let her go. She tried to pass him over to the maid, but he clung to her shoulders all the more. His grip was too firm for one barely a year old. He could sense that his mother was going away. Once gone, she wouldn't return till late at night. The maid tried to coax and cajole him and even offered to take him on a round to the market but to no avail. Raju held Kirti hard with his small hands and when she tried to push him away, he wailed aloud.

Glancing towards her watch, Kirti grew all the more irritated. She got late everyday. Not that anyone ever questioned her about it, yet everyone's silence needled her sharply. Her guilt at deserting Raju everyday was disturbing enough and yet her delay in reaching late bruised her raw. It also stunned her quick. As if she had the least concern for Amar?

Kirti pulled Raju away from her and almost threw him on the bed. She just had to do it... no other escape for her. The maid tried hard to calm him down but Raju yelled — yelled with all his might, struggling to get out of the trap. Kirti bashed Raju again and again, shouting hysterically, "Gobble me...Eat me up. The wretch...Devil...Neither does he die, nor would he let me die. He seems to have come just to devour us all."

Raju's wailing coupled with Kirti's petulance made the atmosphere sombre and grim. Something ominous could have happened if the maid hadn't shielded Raju, saying, "Does one batter a small child so heartlessly!" It wasn't as if Kirti didn't know that. How could she tell what had warped her? Anyone with any sense could certainly fathom her dilemma. And to those who had no sense at all her agony didn't matter, in any case.

Raju couldn't be consoled. She stifled the storm within her, wiped her tears and lifted the bags to walk away. Yet she felt a keen urge to wait for a while, fondle Raju and entreat him, 'Pardon me, my son... My little darling, pardon your unfortunate mother.' She hardly knew what she was going to do what she ought to do.....what could she really do?

No, she stifled her impulse. If she hugged him and fondled him, he would cling to her, leechlike. Again, the same story would be repeated — wailing, weeping and yelling. The same tale that occurred over and again, each day.

As she opened the door, she found Anurag standing before her. Perhaps, he had reached there that very moment and was looking for the call-bell. Kirti didn't take long to recognize him. How could she forget him? Two-and-a-half years had lapsed...but he was the same straight-forward Anurag. Only his face looked a little more plump, indicating his transit away from boyhood. His dress too was an index of his progress and prosperity. "Oh, that`s you?" Kirti interjected. A meaningless query indeed? She hadn't dreamt that she would have to confront Anurag again.... especially at this point.

"How are you, Kirti? How are you?" Perhaps, he also wasn't sure of what he wanted to say.

Kirti was in a fix. She was already late... and now a guest at the gate? Had he been one of the regular visitors, she could have excused herself, telling him to come some other time... But Anurag? He had come for the first time. For first time after two-and-a- half years. Or was it three?

Why had he come? How could he find her address? Does he know about Amar? Had he come to taunt her or...to sympathize with her? To simulate empathy? Even his empathy wouldn't be less than a barb. A host of questions besieged Kirti.

She knew she was getting very late. And yet she had to find the answer to her questions. She had to. She couldn't tell Anurag to come some other time. She had a fear that if she couldn't find the answers, the questions would recoil to torment her.

"You're going somewhere? I've come at the wrong moment," Anurag said, diffidently.

"No, no.... Not really. Come in.... Do come in," Kirti said, making way for him.

Inside, Anurag's glance scanned the spacious room. Carpets, huge, spongy sofas, TV, chandeliers, framed paintings on the walls... He could jolly well make out a rich and luxurious house. Kirti put the bags on a nearby table and quietly sat down. Anurag too took a seat opposite her and endeavoring to extricate himself from the dilemma he said, "You're going out? If you're in a hurry...."

"No, not at all," Kirti could hardly believe her own words. Lost in the past for a while, she asked, "Tell me about yourself. How are you? Where are you?"

"I...?" Anurag groped for words. Or perhaps he wanted to probe his own self before replying. What did he want to tell her? "In fact, I haven't come to talk about myself. I have...." He was again at a loss for words.

Kirti too kept mum. She was delving deep. She wanted to retrieve the past. Some link that could shed light on his sudden, unexpected arrival.

Anurag broke the silence, "How did it happen, Kirti? I can't believe it. I was awfully distressed...." Reaching the end of his utterance, Anurag diverted his eyes from his knotted fingers to Kirti's face.

Kirti too gazed into his eyes to decipher him....So it has reached him! How could he get to know of it? Was he always on the track of shadowing her? Could he never give up his mad crush on her?

"You mean Amar?" Kirti hid her tears, looking away. "How did you get to know about it?"

"Jitendra told me. Jitendra Shukla. You know him, don't you? He's in town."

Silence for a while.

"And you?" Kirti asked, turning towards him.

"I come here, sometimes... for work. Selling computers is my business. I mean, I am a sales engineer in a computer concern. When I come, I stay with Jitendra. He knows you well."

"Why are you so formal? It was never so in the past," Kirti interjected abruptly. A teasing smile flashed on her face.

"The past?" Anurag reflected. "Where is the past? Everything has changed."

Kirti was jolted into the present, suddenly. Her query seemed untimely to her, untimely and far from relevant. The maid peeped from behind the cutrain. Raju had, perhaps, fallen asleep. She could recall...she had been awfully unkind to him...and also that she was getting awfully delayed.

"Would you care to have a cup of tea?" Kirti asked. She wanted to get out of the impasse.

"No, Kirti. I couldn't hold myself. I couldn't stay put. I really don't know why I have come. Had I come on a better day, I would have had a meal too. But I am not that lucky."

Luck, what is luck? Whatever happens is, perhaps, a part of the destiny. Kirti was trapped into her own queries.

"You must be getting late. Some other time." Anurag could not complete his sentence. He wanted to ensure that his coming didn't inconvenience or bother anyone... Not even Kirti.

"If there's something for me...I'd love to be of help...." He didn't know how to communicate his feeling without being sorely misunderstood. Kirti got up, silent. She pondered over what Anurag was trying to say. Why? Was he being satirical?

On the way, she kept on thinking of Anurag. How smart, healthy and handsome he looked! Amar's emaciated frame also emerged before her eyes. How could it happen? Why did it happen? Whose evil eyes devoured him? Could it be Anurag's curse that decimated him? She became past-bound. A host of questions assailed her.

It had been very difficult for her to make a choice between Amar and Anurag. She had met Anurag earlier. Her brother's friend... A trusted friend... He visited her again and again. His behaviour, manner of talking, smiles and articulation enchanted everyone, including Kirti. Whenever he came, Kirti gravitated towards him on some pretext or the other. She confabulated with him. After some time, Anurag offered her a role in a play he was going to stage. She grabbed the offer. For a month or so they were engrossed in the play... and came very close. After the play too, they kept meeting in the campus.

Then came a jolt to their two-year-long friendship. Amar appeared on the scene, suddenly. He happened to be the son of a dear friend of Kirti's father...returned from America with an imposing degree, some time back, to look after the family business. Cultured, highly educated, handsome and rich. Kirti's brother had got a cosy job after two years of unemployment in his firm.

Kirti's father liked Anurag but he was practical... a man of the world. His vision could look beyond Anurag, into the future. He was worldly wise and could weigh him on a pragmatic scale. He had taught Kirti to be rational and also to take her own decisions. He analysed Anurag in depth and also put before her the other alternative....Amar.

Kirti was disturbed. She kept on thinking about Anurag. Lively and attractive — but untouched by worldly wisdom. He never seemed to bother about how he would live and what he would do. He was utterly free from anxiety. Even if there was some, his face wouldn't mirror it. Whenever Kirti asked him anything about it, he evaded her, "What's the hurry? Everything would be okay."

She vacillated and was restless. Many nights were spent in agony. At last, Kirti arrived at a decision. She felt unhappy — but she also had a big relief. She remembered that she had never made a definite commitment to Anurag.... Never.

When she revealed her marriage plan to Anurag, he could hardly conceal his sadness. He sat still for some time, head drooping...silent. Then with a hollow laughter he said, "I thought that .... "Kirti knew what Anurag had in his mind. She knew it only too well. But she couldn't say a word... nor could she ask anything. What could she really ask, or say?

It was Anurag who had broken the murky silence — "I would never forget you, Kirti. No one would ever take the place that you had in my life, no one."

Kirti had no words to console him. No words to heal his wound. She couldn't simulate empathy. She knew she had been unfair to him. She had, however, some arguments to justify her action. And yet she liked Anurag's reaction.

On reaching the hospital, her eyes fell on Amar. Turning his neck with some difficulty, he looked at her — as if he had been awaiting her arrival. Ma sat on the *divan* near the wall, praying. Hearing her footfall, she too opened her eyes and looked towards her.

Kirti was bowed down with guilt for being so late. Mother wouldn't eat anything before reaching home and taking bath. It seemed to her that Amar too was waiting for her. She put the meal bag and the thermos on the table in the corner and said, guiltily, "Raju held me back....Could come away with great difficulty."

She stared at Ma, gauging her reaction to her excuse. She had finished her prayer. Getting up, she replied, "It hardly matters, dear. How can a small child like him understand? And then, I was here."

Ma never said anything. Kirti wondered if she thought about her at all. What would happen to her? She fixed her gaze on her face. There was no answer to her query on her fair, wrinkled face. When she took off her glasses, her eyes appeared all the more swollen. Perhaps, she couldn't sleep well last night. She too would have been on the rack. Amar was dear to her as well. But could her sorrow rival Kirti's grief? Kirti wondered if there could be an instrument to accurately fathom the gravity of one's grief. Was it really possible to forge such an instrument or find it at all?

While leaving Ma didn't forget to repeat her usual sentences — "No need to worry about Raju... I'd come back soon. Ring up in case of any need. Don't be frightened...have faith in God."

Kirti kept on contending with her injunctions for hours. How could she *not* worry about Raju? She was his mother. She had thrust him away, rudely? How could she *not* feel distressed? Who could bear such a burden of sorrow with equanimity? Which God could she rely on? The one who didn't let her be happy even for a while?

Mother patted Amar's head, "I'll return soon, son. Sleep for a while, trusting God. Everything will be fine." It was not clear whether she was consoling Amar or her ownself. The turmoil within her was hard to fathom. She seldom talked openly. Whenever Kirti tried to probe her, she reacted calmly, "We could think about it at leisure. Confront the inevitable. Entreat God to give you the strength to bear the unendurable, the strength of a rock to suffer the pain."

"How are you feeling?" she asked Amar as Ma started to leave. But his eyes were fixed at mother as his lips quivered almost in a whisper. "Ma, see, he's saying something." She came back, fondled Amar's head, asking, "What's it, son?"

"No need to hurry," Amar mumbled, "Do take some rest, Ma."

"I've been resting, son. What else did I do here! You need not worry on my count. If I could, I wouldn't stir from this place. But I have to go home to kneel before God... And look after Raju." She caressed Amar's head, and made slowly for the door, weary and crushed.

Kirti couldn't help reflecting, 'What a mother? How can she contain her tears?' She had heard her wailing bitterly while praying. If her Raju were in a similar plight, she would.... the very thought shook her, frightened her. How could she even think of it? God, my Raju must live, she prayed hard. But how much can a prayer help? Hadn't she prayed for Amar ...prayed long and hard?

Her gaze focused on Amar. He lay silent, eyes closed. It wasn't clear if he was trying to sleep or to get over his turmoil. Why doesn't he share his thoughts with her? Why doesn't he understand her dilemma? Why doesn't he guide her properly? Kirti was assailed by innumerable questions, familiar and unfamiliar. She knew that Amar had no solution—nor had she.

Still, she could recall Mrs. Gupta's words, "If Amar could say... say it in the presence of all concerned, it would become easier for you."

"Feel like sleeping?" Kirti asked, planting her hand on his shoulders, gently. Amar opened his eyes, peered into hers, and turned his gaze towards the ceiling. Two large drops tumbled out of his eyes and disappeared into his sideburns. Kirti wiped the tears, softly. She could never imagine that, so soon, their boisterous dialogue would become so muted and fluid.

When Kirti's eyes opened, darkness lay thick around her. It occurred quite frequently. She couldn't understand whether she had got up after a sleep or had a nap while lying awake. And darkness....it besieged her even after the sun arose. What would happen? How would it happen? She could never comprehend it. It would have been easier if she could keep her promise to Amar. But did she really make any promise? If not a promise, what was it? Simply a prattle? A subterfuge?

Her eyes fell on Raju. How blessed was he? When something annoyed him, he cried bitterly. And then he slept... forgetting everything. What would happen tomorrow? What would happen the next moment? Such questions never troubled his mind. Never.

What would happen tomorrow? The question lingered on and tormented her. Kirti could neither live nor die. She clasped Raju firmly. How could she die? If she died, would her son be able to survive? But was it true? Would she not live, if only Raju were not there? She was so troubled that she wanted to evade the question.

Had Raju not been there, her problem would have been easier to tackle. Perhaps, a shade easier. It was good that she didn't have a daughter. That would have compounded her agony. She could recall Mrs. Gupta's words. She had no child. That's why. But why did she think along that line? She felt guilty... But what could she do? Except to ruminate and brood!

If the trouble had come unannounced, she could have perhaps endured it somehow. But her trouble had a long foreshadowing. She came to know about it much in advance. She had wept bitterly for several days... Cried her heart out. Everyone tried to console her, urged her to control herself. Calm and restrain herself for Raju. Restrain herself for Amar. Gradually, she did restrain herself... learnt at least to look calm. Or, perhaps, time helped to heal her. And she began to think...think of the future. It was hardly possible that one who could restrain herself should cease to ruminate and brood as well.

Raju mumbled in sleep. Snuggling him close to her, she began to ruminate again. What would be his fate? Why was he born so early, so soon? If only he had not come for a year...! But had he not been born, she would have been deprived of the ecstasy... the ecstasy that exhilarated everyone in the home. The thrill she had... that she alone had.

It was barely a year after their marriage that the new signs made her fly. She felt somewhat shy, smiled to herself and at times felt scared... all at a time. Ma petted her all the time. She also arranged prayers and pooja for her, galore.

"Listen!" she had asked Amar, apprehensively. "If something happened, then?"

"Something would happen. So what? We all crave for it," Amar said, innocently, beaming.

"No, not that... Sometimes in child birth...." Her utterance trailed.

"You're mad," Amar interrupted her. "No harm would come to you. As long as I live, no harm whatsoever. We'll have the best doctor, the best nursing home for you."

"Still....."

"What still?" He interjected. "Suppose, something happened to me."

"How?" she beamed mischievously.

"Well, I travel by train, by air. An accident...."

She planted her hand quickly on Amar's lips, "How ominous! Why do you say so? No harm would come to you. Ever. If something were to happen to you, I would strangle myself. No.... I'd slit my throat.... And die." She said, putting her hand over her neck.

Amar hugged her to his bosom, hard. She reacted, thrilled, "Never say that again.... I can't even think of living without you."

Nobody could really believe it. Everyone she met said, "What a shock? How could it happen? He looked so sound and blooming."

The medical experts opined, "At the most six months." Gradually, Amar too realized his predicament. It couldn't be concealed any longer.

Sometimes, he writhed in pain. But occasionally he looked better... for two-three weeks. His frame, however, became emaciated and pallor seized him. From home to hospital, life turned topsy-turvy. Guests and relatives flocked day in and day out. They came to meet him, console him. Kirti's father was bed-ridden due to a stroke. Her mother could stay only for four days. Neighbours and his office employees too came but they had nothing but words of consolation, repeated time and again. Nobody ever thought of her future. At times, Kirti felt like driving them away. Asking them not to intrude. But she had a fear that then she would be still more lonely. How could she confront all that all alone? Whom would she turn to for advice, for help?

Among the neighbours only Mrs. Gupta seemed to be far-sighted... and compassionate. Ten years older, she was the only one who could fathom her agony and comfort her in her fits of deep agony. Besides having a tender heart, she had experience and pragmatism too. It was she who had suggested that if Amar could say something, things would become easier for her. She had also suggested that Amar should say it before someone.... better still in the hearing of his mother.

Even if Amar said so, Kirti knew she would have to stay put for some time. Perhaps, two years or maybe three. At least two years of loneliness. Who knew who would be the right person? How would she find him? Someone who would not be averse to take Raju. She was filled with remorse. She was thinking all that during Amar's lifetime. She couldn't, however, contain her thought.

Amar didn't say anything... either about her, or Raju or the business. He seemed to behave like a recluse, a *sanyasi*. She didn't know how to egg Amar on to say something. Sometimes, she wailed before him. How could she live without him? What would she do? Amar kept mum. A tremor shook his bosom and tears tumbled from his eyes, ample tears. Kirti felt that he was, at last, brooding. He would say something...some day.

The maid answered the door bell. Kirti went in and saw Anurag sitting in the room. They didn't know how to break the ice! Where to begin? Kirti asked the maid to bring tea. Anurag broke the silence over the cup of tea — "Why did you take the trouble? I didn't need it, really."

"We all take tea," Kirti murmered. "Misfortune has made us miserable, battered us. Yet we do eat, sleep and breathe."

The atmosphere grew all the more grim. Anurag could say nothing. After a pause, in an attempt to change the topic he asked, "Where is Virendra?"

"My brother? He is with a firm. At Hyderabad. Sometimes, he drops in."

The silence became unbearable. Anurag was aware of his estrangement. He was hardly in a position to do anything. Kirti didn't know what to say. She didn't know why Anurag had come. What did he desire? But, there was a hazy hope, a faint glimmer. Perhaps, he was the ray of light she was looking for...an alternative for her?

"Where are you posted?" Kirti asked.

"In Delhi."

"Do you come here often?"

"Sometimes, once in two-three months or so," he said. "This time, I could come earlier. Thought, I could be of some help to you. What could one do in a situation like this? Still, if I can be of any help, please don`t hesitate."

"How long would you stay?" Kirti asked, picking up the strain.

"For three days. But if...."

"Who else is there?" interjected Kirti.

"There? At home?" Anurag asked. "Mother, father and... and Usha. Usha, my wife."

Kirti got a severe jolt. She stared hard at Amar, her eyes blank, questioning. Anurag also felt that his reply needed some elaboration.

"I didn't tell you," he fumbled for words, "Last year I got married. I had got a job. Mother became adamant thereafter. Couldn't say no to her." Kirti couldn't hear anything. If she did, she couldn't grasp it. How he used to brag — 'I can never forget you. Nobody can ever take your place.' An old poser teased her... why then has he come? She also wondered why she was with him. What would others say?

"What's the matter...? You look worried!" Anurag asked, suddenly.

She was startled. "Do I?" she replied, awakened from a trance. "I have to go. If...."

"No...no problem. Shall I drop you?" Anurag asked, getting up.

"I will manage," she replied, trying to smile. And lowered her head.

"Anything I can do?"

Kirti folded her hands without raising her eyes. Anurag went away. A deep silence filled the vacuum. Kirti noticed that his cup of tea was full to the brim.

Time was running out. Doctors didn't have much to do. Amar was sent home. The house had turned into a hospital. Friends and relatives were informed. The house was always full of people — coming and going. There was a question in everyone's eyes — "How much time...now?"

Someone was with Amar all the time. Mostly Ma stayed near him caressing his head , praying. Tears coursed down her cheeks while she prayed. Sometimes, she dosed off while praying.

Kirti couldn't understand if it was her grief — or anxiety about her future... or just indignation. Indignation against whom? It seemed to her that people around her were pre-occupied with their ownselves. There was none who thought about her. At least, Amar should think about her. Ma too must think of her. No hope from others, none at all. Amar didn't say anything. It was not that he was always unconscious. Sometimes, he got Raju near him and stared long at him. Sometimes, he lay with his head in Ma's lap and consoled her like a wise man. It was only before her that he became tongue-tied...like a convict.

Kirti egged him on, "Why are you so silent? Tell me, for God's sake. What shall I do without you? Say something."

Once Amar had said, "Take off your *bindi*."

Mortally shocked, she retorted, "What are you saying?"

He had said after a pause, "Let me see how you would look as a widow...after I'm gone."

She wailed, bitterly. Amar patted her on her back and said, "you... you may... you may." Amar's lips then trembled into a silence. Eyes welled up. Nobody could understand clearly the language of those tears. They all interpreted it differently. And were grief-stricken. Somebody explained to Kirti that he had nothing to say. What could he say, after all? Someone explained to her that she must restrain herself. Emotions disturbed the departing soul. It meanders then, restless and doddering.

Kirti realized that time was eluding her. Eluding her briskly. Mrs. Gupta's words reverberated in her ears, 'If only Amar says something.... In someone's presence.' She had herself gone through the ordeal. Five years after her marriage, her husband had died in an accident and had told his *bhabhi* emphatically that his wife must marry again. She must not destroy her life, wailing.

Kirti was trying to lull Raju to sleep. A sudden cry was heard. Somebody ran to her and said, "Hurry... Amar *baboo*...."

She pushed Raju aside, violently... and ran. Amar's eyeballs had rolled up. Breath was turning into gasps. No hope of any recovery. Mother was wailing hysterically, Amar's head in her lap — "Son, my dear son."

Many people stood surrounding his bed, transfixed.

"Amar, speak out Amar," Kirti wailed and sank over his stiffening chest.

"What shall I do?" Kirti cried aloud, again. She wanted him to speak before going away — "Amar! Just say it... whatever you say.... I`ll abide by it."

Kirti collapsed on Amar's stony chest and wailed, loud and bitter.

Translated from Hindi by N.P. Singh ☐

'Mrityunjayee' Birendra Kumar

Malaya Khaund

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (1924-1997), occupies a unique place in the history of post-Independence Assamese literature. After Rajani Kanta Bardoloi (1877-1940), the Father of Assamese novel, no other writer in Assam has earned as much popularity as Birendra Kumar did. He is perhaps the only writer in Assam who sustained himself for quite some time only on his writings. His contribution towards Assamese literature is immense as exemplified by his numerous novels, short-stories, poems, dramas and essays. In the last four decades of his literary career, Birendra Kumar was able to influence a whole generation of intellectuals of Assam.

The contemporary events, which created waves in Assam's as well as country's political life, were taken by Birendra Kumar as themes for most of his novels. Whatever he has written has come out mostly from his personal experience. For example, *Rajpathe Ringiai* (Call of the Highway, 1955), his first novel describes the events taking place on the first Independence day of India in 1947 as seen by his revolutionary young protagonist, Mohan. *Pratipad* (First Moon, 1970) deals with the labour agitation in the oil town of Digboi in 1939. *Sataghnee* (Hundred-edged, 1965) has as its backdrop the Chinese aggression of 1962. *Kabar Aru Phool* (Graveyard and Flowers, 1972) is based on the liberation war of Bangladesh. *Iyaruingam* (People's Government, 1960), for which he got Sahitya Akademi award, speaks about the genuine feelings of the Naga people shattered by World War II. Birendra Kumar portrays the naked picture of the disintegrating structure of the Assamese rural society and its socio-economic dimensions in his novel *Ai* (Mother, 1960) and *Munichunier Pohai*, 1976. *Mrityunjay*, his Jnanpith award-winning novel is based on India's freedom movement in Assam.

India's freedom movement is one of the epoch-making chapters in her political history. A number of novels in various Indian languages were written against that background. It is so because no creative writer can ignore such a big social and political upheaval. In this regard Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (1860) written against the backdrop of the Indigo movement in Bengal and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Ananda Math* (1872) with the all-Bengal Sanyasi revolt as the central theme, constituted the first step towards production of movement-centric literature in India. That was only the beginning of a move which has brought about a significant thematic change in Indian literature.

The appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in the political horizon of India marked the beginning of resurgence in Indian literary world, too. Gandhiji's 'Swadeshi' and 'Satyagraha' became prominent subjects of Indian literature. In this context it will be relevant to refer to the following comments of Carlo Coppla:

> Pre-Independence novels fall into two broad categories which both concerning one basic theme: Indian aspiration for freedom and independence from Britain. Each group's fundamental attitude about the British and the manner in which the achievements of these goals was advocated exhibit the basic difference between these two categories. Those favourable towards non-violent, more or less, peaceful expulsion of the British from India comprised one group. Their outlook could be characterized as Gandhian….The second group advocated the expulsion of the British by any means, whatsoever, usually violent in nature. It consisted of writers with Marxist and terrorist sympathies. (Y.N. Malik's *Politics and Novels in India*)

If we go through the history of world literature we shall find its pages replete with countless works of great writers built on specific important events. Leo Tolstoy's *War And Peace* (1863); Earnest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (1907) to name a few, are examples of such works. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Mrityunjay* contains a real picture of the last stages of India's freedom struggle, i.e. The Quit India Movement. Terrorist activities that took place throughout the country in the wake of The Quit-India Movement, also occurred in Assam and *Mrityunjay* contains a realistic account of such activities. As in some other parts of the country a section of the people of Assam too lost faith in Gandhiji's non-violent method and indulged in violent activities on the lines of Subhash Chandra Bose's guerrilla warfare. Many of the leaders of the armed struggle were basically Gandhian and devout Vaishnavites who believe that God resides in every living being. And yet they took to arms and sabotage only for the sake of the country's freedom. As the young Dhanpur, whose ideal was 'do or die' and whose mind was clear of all conflicts regarding the path of violence they have taken, says, "Do you know why have Manik Bhakat (Vaishnav bhakta), Bhiviram and others begun thinking of guerrilla war? They see no other way. They (British) have to be driven out of India" (*Mrityunjay*, p.42).

Mrityunjay is a reflection of the young Birendra Kumar's response to and association with India's historic freedom movement. In his preface to the novel he writes,

> The genuine impressions have been given here from the memorable events of the last days of India's freedom movement. This is not a historical account. The events took place in our lifetime. I have taken the theme from the events.…This novel is the story of that particular period when people sacrificed and struggled for the country's freedom. I am giving an insight into the minds of those who really understood and got involved in it.

In 1942, World War II was at its height. Allied forces had gathered in Assam in preparation for their fight against the Japanese forces in Burma. Now the fury of the freedom movement was directed against the war efforts of the British Government and its allies. The freedom fighters tried to blow up bridges, railway lines etc. A detailed picture of the horrifying situation created in Assam by World War II is also depicted in *Mrityunjay, Iyaruingam* and *Pratipad.*

His political or radical motive is very clear in *Rajpathe Ringiai.* In this novel, the workers were critical of the newly earned Independence as they found themselves in conditions not in any way better than what it was before. They shouted in Hindi *Ye Azadi juthi hay, Deshki Janata bhukhi hay.* In these words we hear the echo of Jayaprakash Narain's (incidentally J.P. was Birendra's political Guru) following speech: "But freedom of Swaraj had come by then to mean much more to me than mere national Independence. Free India to me meant Socialist India and Swaraj the rule of the poor and downtrodden." At the same time, one of Birendra Kumar's protagonists obsessed with the dictum, 'Liberty is not a thing that you are given as a present,' muses over its implications (*Rajpathe Ringiai* p.77). The following lines reveal the true incident that motivated Birendra Kumar to create his first novel *Rajpathe Ringiai*:

> One of the most important days in my life was 15th August, 1947. The day was a day for selfsearching for the hero of my first novel *Rajpathe Ringiai* (Call of the Highway). He cannot reconcile himself to the Partition of the country, and finds the day wanting in the fulfillment of promises and hopes the Independence movement

gave. He induces workers and tribals, to take to peaceful struggles again to realize the dreams of the unfinished revolution.

In portraying the characters of his novels, which are moulded from earthly dust and are symbolic of real life, Bhattacharyya's extensive experience and deep insight come to light. He has efficiently sketched characters varying from farmers and labourers to high-ranking white Sahibs. Birendra Kumar's characters' broad outlook has made them colourful and impartial. Rejecting the assumption that foreigners and the well-to-do were devoid of human sympathies, he has presented the appealing characters—Flaming Couple and Higgins Sahib in *Pratipad,* Dr. Bruce in *Iyaruingam*, Choudhury, the politician, in *Ranga Megh* and so on.

All his characters are lively and earthly—men and women of flesh and blood. This is so because they are born out of real experience. The author's idealism has found expression in characters like Mahada Goswami, Dhanpur and Rup Narayan in *Mrityunjay;* Rishang and Jeevan in *Iyaruingam;* Chatterjee in *Pratipad;* Rajat in *Ai* and so on. Such characters are described by Marjori Boulton as 'a mouthpiece for the author's own view.'

The predicament of the characters adds beauty to the novels. Circumstances, environment and often a sense of duty are instrumental in creating inner conflicts in human beings. Pictures of such mental strife in *Mrityunjay* are comparable to the ones which Valmiki portrayed, in the *Ramayana,* of Rama's inner conflict prior to Sita's banishment to the jungles in order to uphold the honour of the family and the throne, or the 'to be or not to be' situation projected by Shakespeare in *Hamlet.* The message of the novel is that he who lays down his life for the freedom of his motherland attains peace. Motivated by this profound ideology, the characters get involved in guerrilla warfare. Yet the feeling of guilt pricked their conscience and created mental distress.

Being compelled to involve himself in the violent movement Madhu Bhakat, a Vaishnavite, suffered pangs of inner conflict. Madhu's feeling of remorse has been treated by Bhattacharyya in a unique language—a soul-stirring description of one's mental agony: "If a train is toppled—it is not just the engine that will be wrecked, many lives will be lost—the Mahapurusha (Sri Sankardeva) said — Rama resides even in the souls of dogs, foxes and donkeys." This hesitation and struggle is also apparent in the main protagonist of the novel Mahada Gosain (Goswami), the chief of the guerilla group, and Roop Narayan, an educated youth. Although they realized that death was imminent, the weakness of these duty-bound death-defying heroes for their homes and families often surfaced in their hearts. Gosain could not escape from his inner conflict until his last breath. The 'neither here-nor there' feeling has also been highlighted by Roop Narayan, who is torn between violence and non-violent struggle. Although this educated young man paged through world history and decided upon guerilla warfare as a viable means to attain liberation, the sight of numerous corpses caused in him a mental conflict as to which was superior—the path of violence, which he had opted, or that of non-violence.

The inner conflict of *Mrityunjay's* female character Subhadra, a victim of inhuman torture at the hands of the police and military personnel during the Second World War is equally evident. This symbol of neglected womanhood was driven to suicide by her feelings of guilt which stemmed from her being raped and subsequent loss of social status. Similarly, in the novel *Sataghnee,* a female character Bimla finds herself in a dilemma when, one day, she realizes that the Chinese youth she loves is guilty of treason. Perplexed by the choice between her own interest and that of the motherland, she finally opts for a solitary existence without her husband. The mental agony of *Sataghnee's* heroine Amala also adds to the beauty of the narrative. A pall of gloom descends on her life as a result of having loved two brothers from the same family. Having married the younger Prashant, Amala finds herself in a quandary at the unexpected appearance of her erstwhile lover Rajat. The author has expressed the soul-searing struggle through Amala's father-in-law Bandhuram Majumdar when he says: "A fervent appeal was visible in her vacant look. I sense her plight instantly. She has lost herself in a deep inner conflict." Such natural mental conflicts of the characters enhance the overall appeal of Birendra's literary style.

Birendra Kumar's female characters have their own distinct identity. According to him, "A capable woman does the work of a hundred men" (*Mrityunjay* p.134). *Mrityunjay's* main woman character Dimi and the efficient weaver Kali Baideo, who is a real Gandhian, Lachmi and Nayanmani of *Pratipad,* Sarengla of *Iyaruingam,* Aaimani in *Munichunir Pohar* and other such characters have achieved greatness through their individual thinking and ideals. Basa's mother, the central character of *Ai,* is the picture of an accomplished and affectionate universal mother.

Bhattacharyya had great sympathy for women, who were, at that time, supposed to be the weaker sex in the society. The picturization of tortured women has taken a concrete shape in his literary style. The description of the suicide of *Mrityunjay's* woman character Subhadra the unfortunate life of *Iyaruingam's* Sarengla, a victim of inhuman torture by the Japanese army; the distress of *Pratipad's* Jebunnissa, a victim of the white sahib's lust; the tragic consequences of a woman's love in society; the authentic picture of the life of women doomed by the evil of child marriage in pre-Independent Assamese Brahmin society and parental negligence in educating the female child—all these women's issues have been projected powerfully in Bhattacharyya's novels.

The October Revolution of 1917 and Marxist philosophy had some influence on Bhattacharyya as much as these had on other intellectuals and writers of the country like Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Hindi writers Bhairab Prasad Gupta (*Masal*) and Amrit Roy (*Beej*), Punjabi writer Narula (*Lok Dushman*) and others. Such influences on Birendra Kumar and his deep conviction in socialism, find expression in all his novels in some measures and especially in *Pratipad, Rajpathe Ringiai, Ranga Megh, Sataghnee, Mrityunjay*. His unflinching faith in the basic human values, which permeates through all his creations, puts him almost at par with humanist writers like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Premchand.

According to Prabhakar Machwe, Birendra Kumar's creations do not conform to the two general patterns followed by the earlier schools of Indian writers, one writing sentimentally about social ils and the other realistically documenting poverty and deprivation. In Assamese literature the two best novels were *Jivanar Batot* (Birinchi Kumar Barua) or *Dawar aru Nai* (Jogesh Das) that represented these two schools. "What Birendra did," says Machwe, "was to discard the old moulds and evolve a new pattern of his own in his novels". Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya played a crucial role in the growth of literature of commitment in Assamese. He himself was committed to social responsibility as a writer. This is evident in the following comments of one of the characters in his novel *Rajpathe Ringiai*: "Writings will have to be the sword, poetry will have to be the glow of a new society, songs will have to be the reverberating war-songs of a hundred throats." Like all universal literature, the central theme of Birendra Kumar's literary creations is to serve human liberty.

Finally, one memorable contribution of Birendra Kumar to the healthy growth of Assamese literature deserves commendation. Right from the days of *Aroonodai* (1846) literary magazines have been responsible for the birth of new eras in the history of Assamese literature. *Ramdhenu* (Rainbow), the widely appreciated magazine of very high standard under Birendra Kumar's able editorship was responsible for the emergence of a new, distinct group of writers during the period from the early fifties till the late sixties that gave a new vigour and added colours of the rainbow to Assamese language and literature. And for that, generations to come will hold him and his *Ramdhenu* in high esteem.

❑

A Moment of Self-examination

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya

I think it was an English poet Hugh Macdiarmid who said: an unexamined life is not worth living. I constantly examine my life and find it not worth remembering. And my works? Everytime I try to reread one or a few of them, the inner voice rebukes me and says: when will you write your best work? Everytime I am called upon to present myself before a searching or critical audience, I think of the final judgement which I am sure will condemn me to the hell of obscurity and silence. I know I cannot live forever. The Delhi audience here have perhaps not read my works in the original Assamese, and I do not know what impressions did the translations of some of them make on them. All that I want to convey today to you is my sense of sincerity as an artist of words and along with it an outline of my mind engaged in trying to integrate art with life. There is every likelihood that communication may fail, for compelled by circumstances, I am speaking in a language which is not mine nor yours. However, I shall try my best to convey what I intend to convey.

My life has three distinct periods: the period of childhood passed in an obscure tea garden in upper Assam where my father worked, the period of youth when I received formal education in school and college and informal education through participation in the freedom struggle and constructive work for social change and finally, the period of adulthood when I took to journalism and creative writing. A fourth period can be thought of. It is a period of physical movement, confronting the reality of Indian literature at the level of Sahitya Akademi and intense self-searching. A sense of inadequacy as well as a sense of intense hope for another new spell of creativity haunt or beguile me at the moment.

These divisions are arbitrary, but they seem to fit in with my idea of presenting the very tentative view of my own literary activities. I have an unpublished autobiographical poem which recalls the vivid images of the first three periods of life. Some of the experienced realities in the childhood passed in the tea garden form the raw material for creation in my novel *Kalar Humuniah* (Signs of Times). A boy discovers the multilingual multireligious, class and caste-ridden tea garden community with the sahibs at the top, and the labourers at the lowest level. He discovers nature and himself. The characters interact living a life burdened by poverty but inspired by love, beauty, anger and fellow feeling. The boy becomes one with this world, when suddenly his father loses his job, and he leaves the garden in a sad mood. A nostalgia for the lost life of innocence, juvenile curiosity and abundant love still beckon him back to the bosom of that everliving green garden at the foot-hills of Nagaland.

There is another boy in my novel *Ai* (Mother). He discovers the village where he lives with his widowed mother who nurtures and educates not only her son but regards the tenants of her land as her sons also. There are enough disturbing events in the family and the village but she faces the chaotic world calmly. The village is modelled on my own village of Dhakiakhowa in Jorhat, and the character of mother was drawn in the image of my own wise and loving mother. But they can be any village or any mother. This symbolic village also forms a strong part of the background of my novel *Munichunir Pohar* (Light in Dusk). The story links up Guwahati with the village, where the main character, a professor, returns after his politically over-ambitious wife deserts him. Back in his village he becomes a social reformer and constructive worker and marries his widowed childhood sweetheart after facing the negative reality of the peasant class war, Bhoodan Movement and horrors of 1975 emergency. This village is more conflict-ridden and disintegrated than the village in *Ai,* published in 1960.

I was a very serious student, deeply interested in reading and appreciating literature and writing for school and college journals, both handwritten and printed. Our village had an eminent Assamese poet, and some other writers were in the nearby town of Jorhat where I had literary friends. My own elder brother Sri Nalinidhar Bhattacharya was my constant colleague in my literary pursuits. I wrote poems, short stories and essays. I was a shy speaker. This shyness did not leave me even when later I used to address meetings of all sort, including the political. Speaking and writing are different arts. Perhaps I shall never be able to master the first, and shall have to be satisfied toying with the second. My characters, however, speak better than I do in life, probably because they have no listeners, but only readers. I am however very good at monologue. Years back, the AIR Guwahati broadcast a few dramatic monologues written by me. They were crucial monologues of a few freedom fighters of Assam who were hanged for sedition. Before the fatal noose strangles his throat, the brave martyr speaks the ultimate truths as he realized them in life. I tried to bring back not only the dead heroes alive but induced them to speak to his countrymen in a tone that renews their battered human spirit.

I do not want to define literature or its various genres. I have tried and failed. The creative process is largely unknown. While I was a student I tried my hand at writing short stories or as some say long stories. The size however is not important. Sometimes I start from some idea, sometimes from a peculiar person I meet, or situation I confront sometimes from a scene of beauty or an impressive face. The face is very important for drawing a character unless of course he has other physical or mental abnormal traits. Sometimes you are fascinated by the primitive; sometimes by the probable or possible future, specially when the present tries to cage you like a bird. The woman too is important for a male writer, for she is the other self. In my writings the other self often appears as the whole society; even there the woman acts as the symbol or the starting point. Sometimes the oppressed or the deprived or the marginal person acts as the other self. 'How do you write your novels and stories?' – I once asked Tara Shankar Banerjee, who always encouraged me to write. He said he first conceived the characters and then the interaction started. What are the characters? They are perhaps the images of experienced reality, or keys to understanding and recreating them. I search for the spirit of many everywhere. That is a long story. Let me now recapitulate my own experiences of writing my novels.

I usually start with contemporary experiences. I was a child of the national revolution and a witness to some of the cruel happenings of the Second World War. As a student, I collected donations for the relief of the striking workers in Digboi Oil Refinery in 1939 and also participated in the August rebellion though in a marginal manner. I knew some of the strikers and freedom-fighters very closely. I knew the aspirations of the people and their anger at the acts of injustice, exploitation and imperialist tyranny. These experiences changed my philosophy of life and I became wedded to the doctrine of equality which formed the centre of a world outlook. Other auxiliary inseparable values like justice, freedom, love and beauty also fascinated me as they fascinated the people of my generation. But a novelist cannot live in abstraction, he has to choose some incidents and find his characters. They must be significant incidents, and the characters must be rounded, convincing and with individualities of their own.

I often visited Digboi, to attend literary meet, and to meet the readers of the journals I edited: *Ramdhenu* and *Navayug*. Then I met an old employee of the oil company and collected from him a written account of the 1939 strike. Late Mr.M.N. Roy, who hailed this strike as a starting point of a second freedom movement, was an important participant in the strike. I met other participants. I visited the oil fields and the production units. I saw how officers lived and how workers lived. I wrote a novel based on the strike thirty years after the strike took place. I had to mentally reconstruct the Digboi town of the thirties in its relation to the rest of the country. At that time I lived from hand to mouth and my wife suffered and shared my voluntary poverty willingly. I always chose freedom, and as a result, frequently lost jobs. I lost my third job in 1967 and was doing freelance journalism to survive. To resume the story. I had chosen my characters identified myself with them recreated the strike and made the characters speak, move, love and act. But something was lacking. A lady reader read the first draft and found it unattractive. A despondency overtook me, but soon I overcame it and rewrote it. I was not satisfied with it, as I have never been satisfied with my other works. Is it a desire for perfection or just an effort to be sincere that keeps me dissatisfied? I do not know. But this is a sort of dissatisfaction that is hardly appreciated by the commercial publisher whose first consideration is saleability of the book. He prefers an author who toes his line. This novel that came out of these travails was *Pratipad* (First Moon).

Another novel called *Mrityunjay* was published in 1970. I've already referred to the cause of my fascination for the '42 movement as a theme. Freedom is a great value. But freedom by what means? India was the only country which wanted to achieve freedom non-violently. The movement in Assam was carried on non-violently, but the pressures of the World War II which came to its doors drove our imperialist masters mad and they let lose a hell of tyranny on the freedom fighters and the people. At last I found my theme in this debate and conflict regarding the means, but where is the event and the characters? On 24 Nov. 1943, a great derailment took place in Panikhaiti near Guwahati. It was a military express carrying soldiers of the Allied army. Soon after the incident I happened to pass through the grim scene of destruction and saw the derailed train. I came to know about the workers who did the sabotage work. Years later I met the leader of the sabotage squad and collected the details of the incident. The incident remained in my memory. Before writing the novel, I visited the place of action again and tried mentally to reconstruct the area as it stood in 1942-43. I decided to take the same characters that took part in the work of derailment. Of course I had to delete some, inflate others and deflate quite a few. I had to invent and distort. My aim was all the while to reveal the image of the whole movement, and for this, I had to make the characters engage in conversation, recollection, action, debate and even quarrel. In order to highlight the ideological struggle, I had to make the characters assume typical and representative roles sometimes in fierce opposition to each other. Among the main characters, one is a simple peasant lad Dhanpur who preached strong retaliatory violence and a new social code. The second one is a student Rupram who believed in history and the role of violence in the liberation war; but he was unable to support the mindless violence indulged in by some of his degraded colleagues. The third one is the hero Mahada Gosain who took to violence as a last resort and remained a repentant revolutionary till his end. The women in the novel are mostly victims of war, violence and tyranny, and they carry on the banner of humanness. Dimi, the love-torn tribal woman, is the golden link between revolution and life, between the primitive and modern mind. These women suffer like the women of the "Striparva" in the *Mahabharata,* and at the end one of them asks for a new human order. She asks, "Will man be better when freedom comes?"

In the fifties, I was a teacher in Ukhrul in Manipur, in the land of the Tangkhul Nagas and got my Naga characters for the novel *Iyaruingam* there. I lived there like a Naga and observed the damages done by war and violence to the Naga life and mind. Sarengla was a nurse, and I learnt about her tragic life story. She became my main character. A Japanese soldier who forced her to live with him deserted her and her tragedy began from that point of time onwards. In her, I found the image of a tragic character. Slowly other characters were discovered, though unconsciously: Major Khating who was in the volunteer force of the 14th army and a war hero; Videsselie an ex-INA soldier devoted to Netaji and a protagonist of the Nagas to accept the message of universal peace, democratic rule and independence movement; Rishang the teacher who tried hard to persuade the Indianism; Phanitphang the confused rebel and frustrated lover; Ngazek, the protagonist of conservative Naga culture, Abei the dog who plays a human role in *Iyaruingam* is the unborn future of the Nagas. I made every effort to know the Nagas life – their institutions, religion and customs. An image of a Naga society is there in the novel. I discovered the Nagas and their life anew and tried to make them a part of our consciousness.

I shall not speak about all my novels, or other works. Consciously or unconsciously the contemporary life in Assam and the related areas of north- east India interested me more, and they still interest me. There are immense raw material for creative works lying unutilized in the north-east corner of the country. Some of them I have utilized in my short stories and short novels. But there is not enough time today to talk about them. A new world is lying there unknown and awaiting to be discovered.

Phul Kunwarar Pakhi Ghora (The Winged Horse of the Flower-Prince) is my latest novel. The novel portrays the life of Guwahati on the eve of Independence taking a middle class educated family as its base. The war completely disrupted the life and cultural activities of the younger generation to which I belonged. I remember the war-time scenes vividly: the eclipse of moral values, disruption of education, stoppage of normal literary activities, high price rise, dilemmas of the revolutionaries, and the rise of a greedy contractor-class and amassing of black money. The Allied army movements and their atrocities shook the youth to their depth. Then came the greatest political crisis faced by the people of Assam in the modern age. On the eve of Independence came the move of the Muslim League to grab and drag Assam into East Pakistan. Assam started a life and death struggle to save her identity under the leadership of her Prime Minister Gopinath Bordoloi. Side by side a movement for a separate university was also initiated to assert her cultural identity. The national revolution too received a set-back due to the failure of the August rebellion and RIN mutiny. All these form the back-drop of the novel. The characters of the urban milieu, the propertied men, officers, political workers, journalists, scholars and film-makers, et al are juxtaposed with the characters from villages: tender vaisnavabhakta, Deodhani dancer and tribal peasants. A third set of characters – they are the creations of war – a South Indian Burmese evacuee from Rangoon who lost all his near and dear ones during his journey by foot across the Burmese hilly and jungle terrain to Assam, an American Professor, an Austrian nurse, the members of women auxiliary forces and Chinese soldiers figure as marginal players. There are scenes of extramarital love and break-down of family life, of frustrated lovers, experimental man-woman relationship without marriage and of impact of divorce on the mother-daughter relationship. It is a world of chaos on which a sense of unity is imposed to bring about an aesthetic or moral order, through a worldview inherent in the open structure of the novel. It is a recreated value-ridden world.

I write constantly and when I do not write I serve my people in various capacities. I've no life apart from the people whom I love intensely. I write also for the newspapers and journals. I have a hunger for information and knowledge and I read ceaselessly. The Sahitya Akademi has compelled me to move, and in a way, I am now beginning to know my India more and more. I've been abroad. But there is a magic space which I love intensely and which has so far given me all my themes. Of course, the exotic space and the non-human world often induce me to write. I wrote an experimental novelette based on my experience of my first visit to Russia, taking the imaginary dialogue of the Indian visitor with his Armenian interpreter as the staple material of the narrative. The intention was to contrast the two cultural situations: Indian and Russian. The other experimental novelette was promoted by one of my visits to the Guwahati zoo, when two chimpanzees held my attention. I treated them as objects of political experiments of a set of social managers who wanted to turn them into human beings through scientific mechanisms. I've written some other novels also. But I want to leave them out of today's discourse.

You've so much to write, but so little time to realize your ambition.

A realization has dawned on my mind in recent years that the time given to public meetings or domestic work seems to me the time lost to creative writing. And I am aging. The lost time takes its own revenge. In a mood of repentance I often try to write poems in the blank pages of my diary or make jottings of what could have been a short story or a novel. I am happy when I am in the familiar villages and hills or valleys of Assam and North-east India. Every time I come from Guwahati to Delhi I feel that I've come from the village to the town, from the heart to the head, from the open sky to the gold cage. I cannot justify this strange feeling. I have been living a life of voluntary poverty, just to keep my spirit alive. An American writer said "the writers are supreme in spirit but light in purse." You are not always supreme in spirit too. Sometime I feel that I am the relic of a bygone age, an age the young and the pragmatists have rejected. Sometimes I feel I belong to the future. But the present imprisons you and treats you as a bird in a cage.

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Death of the Artist

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya

Some two lakh young men and women had gathered at the meeting. Kamal was listening to the lectures of the artists sitting in the dilapidated building of the artists' guild. Even after the meeting ended, he kept sitting stiffly in the chair that had never seen paint, and kept looking with dejection at the gaps between the tall trees.

Just then arrived Himanshu. Getting up respectfully from his chair and pulling a murha for himself Kamal said, "Sit, Himanshuda."

Himanshu sat down. His black backbrushed hair too bore the sign of dejection. His face had the dry crust of age. On his body was thick khadi pyjama and Punjabi kurta. A pair of dirty sandals on his feet.

Looking at his face Kamal understood, probably today also he did not get the promise from the Dispur officials about buying his paintings. The red-taped file had stopped moving. He had been spending for bus fare and going there frequently for the last six months. The officials had not been able to fix the price of even two paintings.

"It wasn't decided even today, Himanshuda?" Kamal asked in a tender voice.

"It was not. It won't be decided in the future too. When poor people go to Lanka, the sea too dries up. While I was returning I prayed, God, they're blind, without good taste. Forgive them."

Nowadays Kamal's ears had been damaged hearing complaints against Dispur. The main ones were about corruption and slowness. Today he heard a new complaint. They were without good taste. That was right. In a business culture, where was the place for taste? Here art too was saleable liquor. It had very few people who could get the meanings in Himanshu Babu's paintings and fix their price. Their work was to bargain superficially and lower the price. Kamal's temper rose, "It is unforgiveable that people from the place where Chitralekha, the earth's first artist, was born, do not know the real value of paintings!

"These things are to be barked into microphones only!" Himanshu answered. "I want to ask, whether those paintings of King Bana's time are in Sonitpur or in Dwaraka? And I want to ask whether Chitralekha ever found a real connoisseur?"

"History gives no answer. Even the poets have not mentioned about what happened to Chitralekha after Usha was married off."

"If I say Chitralekha died of hunger, will it be incorrect Kamal?" Himanshuda smiled dryly. After some time he said again, "There are a few coins left in the pocket, let's have tea." He put his hand inside his pocket and brought out four fifty-paisa coins.

"Keep the money. I'll go and order the tea." Before Himanshu could say anything Kamal abruptly got up from his seat and went out. Nearby was Manohar's teastall. He had been running his teastall on leased land belonging to the Judge's Court since a very long time. The man had become rich during these few years. Now the court had sent him an order to leave the land. Probably the lease had ended. The condition of the stall was bad. Many people had not paid their outstanding dues. As soon as he saw Kamal Manohar said, "Good that you've come. The artists' guild has almost two thousand rupees credit. Ask them to pay up. I don't even get to meet Mridul." Mridul was the secretary of the guild. Kamal's face assumed a serious look. In the guild building under candlelight artists, writers, architects, people of similar interests got together in the evenings for *adda*. Then tea and sweets were borrowed from Manohar's shop. Kamal was not aware that the credit on this tea and sweets had gone up to two thousand rupees. Only today he realized how poor the artists' guild was. He said, "I'll tell Mridul. For now, send two cups of tea and a rasagolla." He took out two rupees from his pocket and placed it on Manohar's table.

Manohar did not even look at the money. "I'll provide tea free of cost to you, Babu. I've heard, you're very close to the Judge. Had studied together. Can't you speak to him on my behalf?"

He remembered Satyen. Kamal had studied with him together in college. That was the time of the 1942 movement. Satyen was a member of the revolutionary group. He had taken Kamal to their office and introduced him to their leader. There, for the first time, Kamal had heard about Marxist revolution. The idea of the rule of the proletariat seemed like a golden dream. That day, he had given the nickname 'Guru' to Satyen. Of course 'Guru' did not remain in the group for long. Why he did not stay could be well understood. He called Satyen 'Guru' even when they met now. But he never spoke to him about these things.

Kamal asked, "Who told you he's my friend?"

Manohar said, "You must have forgotten. I used to work in the New Hostel mess. I know both of you since then."

Kamal looked at Manohar in surprise. His face had changed much, but his eyes were the same. He felt elated. "What about your children?"

"Babu, I've married off the two girls. Have seen the face of grand-children. I had two sons. One of them died of typhoid. He gave us much grief. I engaged two big doctors from the Medical and spent two thousand rupees. God did not open his eyes to look. The younger one has studied in college and has now joined the 'Jai Ai Asom' group. Does not come home at night, keeps attending meetings. Even then, I haven't said anything. We have not been able to do anything. The land became full of foreigners. If they can let them do something. Land, business, language has to be saved. You've heard what was said in the lectures. Our younger one also gave a lecture."

"What is his name?"

"Lachit."

"Lachit? Who gave the name?"

"Have you heard about Deka an? He comes here sometimes to have tea. When he heard that a boy had been born he said, 'Manohar, I'll give a name to your son.' Deka an is a peculiar man. One has to agree to what he says. I accepted the name he suggested. At home my wife had objected, saying, 'Should any one name this thin boy Lachit?' But seeing my mood she kept quiet. Did you hear Deka an's poems in the meeting today? He was thundering. He is the real Lachit."

Kamal felt the flow of the Luit could be stopped, but not that of Manohar's words. Saying 'I'll speak to Satyen' he returned to the artists' guild building. When he came back he noticed that the floor had been cleaned. Himanshuda was standing looking at the pictures on the wall. When Kamal asked him to sit in the chair he smiled and said, "Is this etiquette required in this building? See, I'm feeling so good here, as if I'm in my yet-unattained own house. I've swept the house and have looked at the paintings. As if I've looked at my children. But the mind is full of worries. I didn't find the smell of earth in the paintings. They seem foreign to me."

"Does it harm if there's foreign influence in colour, line, figure or style?"

Himanshuda looked silently at the floor. Kamal understood, he was angry. Kamal looked at the paintings of various artists arranged haphazardly in the ugly building. His mind filled up with deep dissatisfaction. Each of the artists had good knowledge of the figurative. But there was no sign of their own innermost feelings in their works. They also did not bear the stamp of deep universal emotions of the world in general. People came to the artists' guild, talked, went away. Not even critical appreciation rose in their minds. Most of them had jobs and were educated youth. Even though the writers came, literature and art did not meet, meeting took place of general human relations. Exchanges at the critical level did not take place. Outside events did touch the hearts of the artists, but they had not yet found the freedom people were looking for. That was why the paintings were not able to give the expansive feeling of freedom to the viewers. That was why in the hearts of the two lakh youths gathered at Judge playground, no liberating feeling of art was felt. Although the paintings of the artists' guild were just in front of them in the dilapidated building.

Kamal's heart shook. These were merely worries about the society. He had not been able to purify and expand these thoughts with critical analysis. He had not been able to bring in liberal ideas about the society into this building, because he had not been able to infuse it with the feeling of unity found in universal critical appreciation. His eyes unknowingly filled up with tears.

Himanshu looked at him and said smiling, "I can't reply to your question. It is difficult to talk about feelings that are unclear."

Kamal said, "I'm also in a similar condition. Have not been able to purify thoughts about the society with critical appreciation."

"It is difficult to bring such connection in this art. Why don't you take an easier path?" After some time Himanshuda said, "Have you ever seen rural art?"

"No."

"Then go to the villages."

"Rural art is dead."

"Some is alive. Go where it still exists."

"Where should I go?"

"I won't give any advice. Can somebody searching his way in the dark show the way to others?" After some time he said, "Poverty is killing me. If the body suffers, probably artistic feelings also diminish. Without money one cannot buy colour, brush and canvas. If these are not there the mind dies completely. The thought of God, or the critical faculty totally depends on calories." After some time he said, "I've heard that Mridul has made some bamboo idols together with an artisan from Nagaon. I have not been able to go and see them. Nowadays I get tired easily. This road is the right road. But he will have to draw pictures. He has made some. This is my only solace. But Kamal, the time has come for me to leave. Life has turned into a cry in the wilderness."

Kamal could not stop his tears this time. Poverty was really the destroyer of all virtue. Poverty would not disappear without social change.

People could not live on wild berries alone.

After some time Manohar himself entered the artists' guild with tea and rasagolla. He was bewildered to see tears in Kamal's eyes. Putting down the tea carefully on a small table he asked, "Have you received any bad news Babu?"

Handing a cup of tea to Kamal Himanshuda asked, "Have you seen anybody in the country laugh openly?"

Manohar said perplexed, "I've only seen Bani Babu laugh openly. But sometimes that too seems like subdued laughter. Nowadays lips purse up even when one parts them. Children too have forgotten to laugh. Now and then they merely give a tight smile. There is dearth of open laughter."

"What about crying? About crying one's heart out?"

"If I die, who knows whether my wife would cry or not! In the city I've not seen anybody cry one's heart out." Manohar became calmer. "The rich shut the heart up, the poor do not even have the strength to laugh." Himanshu asked, "Kamal Babu's heart has opened up. Can you say why?" "How will we know if you don't say?"

"It has opened up in the suffering of the earth." Himanshu stopped. Sipping tea he said again, "For you the death of your people is bad news means. For Kamal Babu bad news is different. He is crying because he has not found a way to make all people happy."

"It is not possible to make everybody happy. If one is happy, another is sad," Manohar replied. Then he went back straight to the shop. Before going he reminded Kamal that he should speak to Judge Satyen about the land. Kamal nodded.

When they finished drinking tea the red evening sky shone in the horizon. A gust of cool breeze blew from the Brahmaputra. Kamal saw reddish light fall on Himanshuda's face. Slowly darkness covered the earth. The artists' guild building too became dark. With a matchstick Kamal lighted a half-burnt candle lying on the table nearby.

"Will Mridul come?" Himanshuda asked.

"He will."

"He has said, some north Indian officer wants to buy the painting I had drawn in Shillong. If he buys I can give it to him."

"What will be the price?"

"Four thousand."

Kamal wanted to say something in reply. Just then Mridul arrived. Mridul's smile shining among his half-gray beard, deep-set eyes and unruly hair would make even a silent princess speak. His age was camouflaged by his stocky thin body. As soon as Mridul sat down on a stool Kamal said, "You will live a hundred years. Just now Himanshuda had asked about you.

Will the north Indian officer buy his painting?"

"No. He had come here some ten days ago. He said, his daughter's marriage had been arranged. He had to buy jewellery. They have the practice of dowry. So he would not be able to buy the painting." Mridul slowly said with dejection. "Rastogi loves paintings. But he loves his daughter too. So with the money he had to buy jewellery and other things for the dowry. A scooter, colour television and a fridge would have to be given to the groom. At least fifty thousand rupees would be spent on that. Our paintings are like the Indian coral flower. Required neither to worship a guru or a God."

Himanshu asked, "Then leaving aside painting, the society would have to be reformed first, what do you say Kamal?"

"Merely reforming the society would not be enough. Society means people, human relations. The critical faculty of people would have to be awakened. Otherwise people would not learn restraint. Probably Mridul has not spent even five hundred for his own wedding, but Rastogi would spend fifty thousand before his daughter's wedding. The groom would have to be given a scooter, a colour television and a fridge. The man had the critical faculty, but it disintegrated."

Himanshu asked, "Do you know Rastogi?"

"Yes, at one time he was a member of the Socialist Party. He was introduced to me when he had once come to Assam. This time round when he reached Guwahati he searched me out and repented for having to take up a job. His father had expired and the burden of a family had fallen on his shoulders. Gradually the enthusiasm to reform the society too blunted out! Now he does not even hesitate to give dowry. Reformation starts with oneself first!"

"In this manner when will the society change? When will people buy artists' paintings on their own!" Himanshu put his hand in his pocket and searched for a cigarette. He did not find a cigarette. The last one had finished when he was in Dispur.

Mridul took out a cigarette packet from his pocket and gave it to Himanshu. Lighting a cigarette Himanshu said, "Doesn't the earth suffer when artists starve?"

"It does. But for most people the main worry is food." Mridul answered, "Today Nanda from Beltola village had come and asked for forty rupees. Did not have money to buy rice. I too did not have any money. The day was spent looking for it."

No one asked whether he could found the money or not.

Just then Lachit came in. With him was a man who worked in the shop. The man picked up the cups and saucers noiselessly and went out. Lachit came and sat on a bench. Kamal said, "Mridul! This is Manohar's younger son. Now a front ranking worker of the agitation to extradite foreigners. Looking at Kamal Lachit said, "Father told me you were here. So I've come in a hurry. We've demanded that foreigners' names should be removed from the voter's list. If the demand is not accepted we'll ask people to boycott the elections. We've arranged a meeting at the University. I came to invite you too. The meeting will be day after tomorrow evening. We've informed all the groups."

Kamal answered, "If it is not known who are the foreigners, then it would be difficult to identify their names in the voters' list. What help would I offer you if I attend it?"

"Those who are foreigners according to the law and the Constitution are the foreigners for us too," Lachit said. "Of course you can give your own opinion." After some time Lachit said again with anger in his voice, "This is the struggle to safeguard the identity of the Asomiya society. You'll have to attend it even if you're not invited."

Himanshu said in confrontation, "Look Lachit, I don't know you. Since you're Manohar's son, you're my son too. How will you safeguard the identity of the Asomiya society with the agitation? We're the ones trying to safeguard the identity. Without art, literature and science which identity would you safeguard? I can't make out what will be the outcome of this agitation."

Lachit became agitated. He said, "Land from the Asomiya farmer's hand are getting transferred to foreigners' hands. Bangladeshis and Nepalis have come and become voters here. In this way, by 1990, native Asomiya people would become a minority. Then political power would be forfeited and we would lose everything."

Seeing Lachit agitated Himanshu smiled, "I'm growing old. I've seen and heard much. If you really want to do something, then find out why they have come here. They've come because you all don't like to do physical labour."

Lachit answered, "That is not untrue. But would you say there is no political conspiracy in the abnormal rise in Assam's population?"

"There might be. Its root cause is corruption." Himanshu said, "I'll go a step further and say, corruption is due to capitalism on the one hand, and lack of character on the other."

Lachit listened to Himanshu with patience and said, "I don't have time to listen to everything Himanshuda. I know you. Who doesn't know you? I've heard everything from Kamalda. You all paint pictures, but don't get to eat. You arrange exhibitions, people don't come to see the paintings. Even if they come, they don't buy. There is struggle in this also, we will fight." Then Lachit went out.

Himanshu remained silent. He had heard such reassuring words from many political workers like Lachit. But no one had been able to improve the condition of the artist. Hundreds of promises had silently got buried. So today too faith did not spring in his mind. He was getting old. His wife was also becoming old. The body was becoming diseased. Probably the time had come to bid farewell to the world. He had piled up his paintings in a corner of his house. He had not been able to take them to the gallery, because Assam did not have a real art gallery. There was no use blaming Lachit and the like. They felt, they had been deprived. The main reason for deprivation were capitalists from outside, businessmen, and the increasing importance of officialdom. They had turned Assam into a colony. Farmers and labourers had also arrived. A majority of these outsiders were foreigners. After East Pakistan or Bangladesh was formed, a foreign country came into existence just near Assam, and people who arrived from there were foreigners. Nepal was of course foreign even before that. Those who came up to a specified date acquired citizenship, but the others were foreigners. The young men wanted to identify these foreigners and drive them out. Those who had settled in Assam, had got assimilated in the broad neighbourhoods of their people – it was not so easy to identify them and drive them out. Those foreigners who were Hindus did not want to go. Those who were foreign Muslims, they too did not want to go. Same was the case with the Nepalis.

This agitation was a very complex one.

After some time six people entered the artists' guild building. Seeing them come in, Himanshu got up to go. Looking at Kamal he said, "Kamal, look, if you find a buyer inform me. The old woman will be waiting for the news with hope. I can't think of what I'll tell her today. I'm leaving."

Kamal got up instantly. He said, "Himanshuda, don't worry. I shall search for buyers. ...Please wait." Kamal went in. He walked up to Manohar's shop. Manohar was about to close his shop. Kamal asked, "Do you have fifty rupees? I'll return day after tomorrow."

Manohar had seen Kamal ask for money for the first time. Surprised, he said, "Why this sudden need for money, Kamal babu?"

"I can't tell you why."

Putting a fifty-rupee note in Kamal's hand Manohar said, "Take it. I know that this money is not for you. But don't forget to tell Satyen babu about me."

Taking an envelope from Manohar, Kamal put the note inside it and after closing it wrote an address on it. Then he came back. Himanshu was waiting for him on the grass outside the building among the glitter of glowworms. Kamal said with a smile, "Himanshuda, put this envelope in your pocket. Manohar had told me long ago, someone had left a letter for you with him."

"A letter for me?" Himanshu asked in surprise.

"Yes, a letter for you."

Himanshu put the letter into his pocket and left. Kamal returned to the artists' guild. He felt the guilt of having done something that should not have been done. For a long time today he had noticed disorientation in Himanshuda's behaviour and speech. When he had heard the sentence "Doesn't the earth suffer when artists starve?" a storm had passed through his heart. Even Buddha had not spoken about this kind of suffering, neither had Marx. This could come only from the mouth of the tormented Himanshu. Kamal wanted to become as large-hearted as the earth, but his pocket was empty. So he borrowed from Manohar. What motive Manohar had in mind when he lent the money, Kamal knew it well. He would have to speak to Satyen about the leased land on Manohar's behalf. He knew it was not proper to speak to a judge outside the court about such matters. But since he had given word to Manohar, he would have to speak.

When Himanshuda would open the envelope when he reached home, what would he do? Would he keep the note untouched and return it to him? Nothing could be said. Himanshuda had great self-pride.

Among the six friends who had surrounded Mridul and were engaged in a discussion, one was Makhan Borpujari. He had recently returned after exhibiting paintings in the United States. He was sitting quietly. The joy of seeing the buildings of artists' guilds and art galleries there must have diminished after coming back to Assam. There was nothing like that here, only the feeble struggle of a candle against darkness. Nevertheless, this struggle was the struggle of the Asomiya artist.

Mridul had taken up some new activities in hand in the past few days. Collaborating with a rural artist from Nagaon, he had made various kinds of bamboo statues in Beltola. He had also arranged an exhibition of the idols. But beyond a handful of sympathetic connoisseurs, he did not get any response from anyone else. But his mind suddenly opened up. He noticed the statues and images on the walls and pillars of Assam's *namghars*. Taking inspiration from them, he had started painting a series of pictures. These paintings had now been piled up at home. Now he wanted to paint the large nearly vanishing Brindaban pattern done by Sankardeva.

Listening about his new art, Kamal suddenly recollected what Himanshuda had said, "The artist will have to give new form to past glory in this way." Mridul's work was like balm for Himanshu' unhappy soul. These meetings, discussions did not revolve around a specific topic. They did not take a predetermined path like the particles inside an atom, but sporadically jumped from one orbit to another. From art the discussion suddenly veered to agitation. One of them said, "I met an agitation worker today. He wants paintings that would add to the spirit for the agitation, would reinforce it. I said, we don't have the tradition of making political paintings."

One of his colleagues said, "I don't have the interest to make such commissioned paintings. I shall paint if I get some inspiration."

Everyone seemed to agree. Suddenly Kamal asked, "Could our writers and artists stay away from the agitation? They would either have to accept it, or reject it. Or they could accept its core idea and discard the unimportant parts. If one accepted the people that comprised a society, one also had to accept that group of people in every other aspect, in body, mind and spirit. Artistic awareness is not separate from other aspects of human society." For some time nobody uttered anything. When the silence became unbearable, Mridul said, "If the agitation brings up the issue of the society's identity, we will take that up."

Kamal did not say anything in response.

Then discussion changed course. They decided to organise a group art show on Mahananda Sharma's death anniversary. Sharma had died some time ago. He was the first to organise a group exhibition in Guwahati. After that no exhibition had been organised with that fanfare and diligence. Makhan was impressed with this decision. He said, "Mahananda Sharma's soul would find peace if we can make it a success." Remembering Mahananda Sharma's selfless service towards art, everyone's face became sad with gratefulness. After some time the meeting ended. Except Kamal and Mridul everyone returned to their own destinations.

Mridul said, "Kamalda, we can't accept your ideas all the time. Of course we cannot deny the value of your ideas."

"I can't assimilate anywhere, Mridul. I go to every *adda*, but everywhere I'm an outsider. In the whole world, only I don't have my own identity. I try to carry everyone along and lessen their sorrows. I know that is not possible entirely, but I spin like a top all over with this thought in mind. I have no fixity anywhere."

"I've noticed that the cow in the front is always devoured by the tiger. I know what is there in the envelope given to Himanshuda. The one who tries to remove everybody's sufferings is either Buddha or Marx. But the other people of the society remain the same," Mridul said with a smile.

"I am only Kamal, Mridul. I don't want to be anybody else. Why are you laughing at me?"

Mridul said, "Maybe one becomes Kamal when one distributes oneself among everybody." Mridul began to laugh.

After some time they put the lock on the door of the artists' guild and went out. Outside there was winter moonlight. There was dew on the grass. After some time they reached a road trisection and took two different directions. Walking some time on the quiet road Kamal suddenly noticed a boy kneeling on the middle of the road. The boy was writing 'Jai Aai Asam' on the road.

Two days later, Kamal arrived at the artists' guild office in the evening after he had attended the students' meeting at the University.

Inside, Mridul had lighted a new candle and was sitting smoking a cigarette. When he saw Kamal, Mridul stubbed off the cigarette and got up and asked him to sit.

Kamal was about to discuss the speeches of the various group leaders at the University meeting but stopped short on seeing Mridul's face. It reflected the darkness of grief. He asked, "What's the matter, Mridul?"

Mridul replied, "Himanshuda has left us." As if a thunderbolt struck Kamal on his head.

"What had happened?"

"What else! Suffered a heart attack early morning yesterday. I spent the entire day in the medical college. He had improved slightly. The end came at mid-day today. I've come straight from the crematorium. There were only a few people." Mridul said with sadness. "I had conveyed the news to you. But you were not at home the whole day yesterday."

"Yes, I came and contacted Satyen early morning. To put a stay order on Manohar's shop. Satyen did not like it that I had gone to speak on his behalf. When I insisted he said he would think of considering an extension of around six months. But don't know whether he would or wouldn't. Then I had food and went to the University. I got delayed there. So where would you have found me?" After some time Kamal spoke again with grief, "So Himanshuda has gone!"

Kamal's whole body felt tired as did his mind. Himanshuda was an artist of artists. Even though he was not the guru of young artists like Mridul and Makhan, they too respected him. In a way he was their guide. Especially with Mridul his soul connected well. He could point out where a society's identity lay. Even in the baskets villagers wove he could see the familiar image of the society. His soul was in local handicrafts. The subject matter of his paintings was village folk, trees, plants, fields and cottage crafts. He generally turned the city-centred mind of Mridul and the others towards the village. The society actually lived in the villages.

These artisans were poorer than the most deprived in the towns. Begging every day for existence was their main activity. But nobody thought about them. Even those who worried day and night about safeguarding the society's identity.

Looking at Kamal's face Mridul composed himself and said, "Himanshuda proved the impotency of our society. Maybe you don't know about that." Mridul stopped, a bitter smile on his face.

"Tell me what happened," Kamal said.

Mridul took out an unopened envelope from his pocket and putting it in Kamal's hand said, "You had given this to Himanshuda. He had returned it to Manohar that night itself. There is something written on it, read it."

Kamal took the envelope and went near the candle. He read, "I don't want to live on the mercy of poor Manohar. If the death of an artist who had been denied the value of his labour awakens the society, then why don't I die? But how will the impotent retain their identity? I'm returning this to its rightful owner."

Kamal felt as if he had fallen from a tall tree onto the ground and broken his waist. Himanshu decided not to accept his fifty rupees but instead starved and embraced death. Actually he had become a martyr.

Translated from Assamese by Anuradha Rajkumari Choudhury

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Hundraj Dukhayal's Poetry: A Portrait of Twentieth Century

Motilal Jotwani

Death knows no calendar. It was only on 14th January, 2003 that Padmasri Hundraj Dukhayal received the Delhi Sindhi Academy's prestigious Millennium Award of Rs. 11 lakhs for his life-long services to Sindhi poetry. And on 21st November, 2003, he died.

His work "in the nature of creative literary writing" adequately met the demands of our times—the times, which were present in his poetry (as they were, and also represented as they should be). Echoing what a renowned critic said the other day, we may say that it was not enough for Dukhayal to merely try to find the verbal equivalent of his own states of mind and feelings as also those of fellow humans; he was aware of where he himself was going and also of where he was leading them.

When Gandhiji launched the Non-cooperation Movement in 1921 and gave a nation-wide call to quit Government schools in favour of national schools, Dukhayal, 11 at that time, did so. A student of national school, he started writing poetry at the age of 14. He used to compose national songs and sing them in public processions and meetings which were organised in support of Indian Independence. In 1930, at the time of Salt Satyagraha, he organised a Bandar Sena (Vanar Sena; Monkey Brigade) and Swaraj Sena (Self-rule Brigade), the student-members of which took active part in the picketing of wine shops and foreign cloth shops. Under the auspices of the Bandar Sena, Dukhayal launched *The Hanuman,* a weekly in Sindhi, reminiscent of Hanuman's role in the great Ramayana war. As it happened, he was arrested in 1931 for writing "seditious" articles against the British rule. He was under trial, but was released on account of the Gandhi Irwin-Pact. In 1932, he was detained in Hyderabad (Sindh) Central Jail for three months. Soon after release he was rearrested in Larkana and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for 28 months with a fine of Rs.200.

Subsequent to his release in 1934, Dukhayal joined as a teacher in one of the Harijan schools in Larkana, and also started a Harijan bank. In 1937, he launched another weekly in Sindhi, this time called *Dukhayal* after his nom de plume. He continued to publish it through 1949; On Gandhiji's instructions, he had stayed back in Sindh even after Partition in 1947 to carry on his constructive work.

In 1941, in the village of Ratodero in Larkana district, Dukhayal established Gandhi Seva Ashram where spinning wheels and hand-made paper were manufactured. More than a dozen persons dedicated to constructive work lived there in the Ashram. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, Dukhayal was detained for two months. Soon after the release, he was rearrested in Larkana and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for six months and sent to Sukkur District Jail. Once again, on January 26, 1945, he was arrested for reading out the "Pledge of Freedom" and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for three months.

Dukhayal regards all these five imprisonments for the national cause as a *turanga tirtha yatra* or a prison pilgrimage — but not the sixth one which was imposed on him by the Government of Pakistan, in 1948. A charge was levelled against him that he had been manufacturing arms in his Ratodero Ashram in a plot to unseat the Government of Pakistan. During the search, an ordinary kitchen knife was found from the premises of the Ashram. In the trial, he was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for six months with a fine of Rs.200. In appeal, the sentence was reduced to imprisonment for two months or fine of Rs.500. After he was released from jail, Dukhayal remained in Ratodero, Larkana and Karachi for two months. Gandhi Sewa Ashram of Ratodero had been declared defunct and it became increasingly more difficult for him to continue with his constructive activities. In 1949, he migrated to India, as others had done before him.

He devoted his services to the cause of rehabilitating the displaced persons from Sindh upto the year 1951, when Acharya Vinoba Bhave started his Bhoodan Movement and he joined it. For about 12 years, he was with Vinobaji in his great mission touring the country on foot. Thereafter, he settled down in Gandhidham/Adipur (Kutch) and established the Sarvodaya Press from where he published *Dharati Mata* in Sindhi with a view to encouraging the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements and propagating the Sarvodaya ideas and activities. Besides, he established Sindhi schools in the area and worked for them.

Dukhayal has published a number of books containing national and patriotic songs and poems, both in Sindhi and Hindi, lakhs of copies of which have been sold.

The grateful nation conferred on him Padmasri for his great services to Indian life and letters in 1984.

As the introduction of the poet given above reveals, Dukhayal was deeply influenced by Gandhiji. All over India, Gandhi blazed a trail for little Gandhis, his political and literary heirs; the political ones like Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan, affectionately called the Frontier Gandhi, and the literary ones like Dukhayal, lovingly designated as the Sindhi Gandhi. These Little Gandhis disseminated what Gandhiji said and emulated what he did. Whatever Dukhayal wrote or did were imbued with Gandhian thought and action. As their mentor Gandhiji himself did, these little Gandhis in politics and literature espoused the cause of Indian Independence in the general framework of humanist ideas. Hence they were simple and forthright in their method of working and writing, so much so that today in retrospect, what the political little Gandhis stood for looks naive, and what the literary little Gandhis wrote reads like versification rather than poetry and sermons in story form rather than literature" (see S.R. Bhatt's essay in *Gandhiji in Indian Literature*, Mysore, 1971).

What makes a poet great? Is it words only, or words coupled with actions? From the stand-point of dilettantist criticism, it may be only words that make a poet great. But critical culture, mature as it is, looks beyond the secluded pale corners where certain classes read poetry for individual aesthetic pleasure in the broad bright avenues where poetry interacts with the life of the masses for general weal. As the poetry for the aforesaid classes is never devoid of elements of general weal, the one for the masses is never without aesthetic pleasure. Great poets all over the world have at once been satisfying the elite classes and appealing to the masses. Dukhayal easily fills the bill and is one of them.

Swami Chinmayananda says : "To give we must have abundance in ourselves. We can't give what we have not." A man of fullness, good health, good emotions and great knowledge, Hundraj Dukhayal gave himself away to the people through his poetry. In more than 1,000 pages of the *Sangeetaanjali* (Gandhidham Adipur, Kutch, 1963) are collected his major works: *Jhoonqaar, Qaumee Lalkaar, Sangeet Varkhaa, Gul Thaa Ruani Tunhinjee Yaad Jaa, Laabootee Lahar, Parlaau* and *Sangeet Phool*. All of these seven works express the collective unconscious of the Sindhi-speaking people of his times. They take us on a colourful and extensive journey through the corridors of the times and spaces in which the Indian people waged a struggle against the British rule. In the journey, the reader comes across actual scenes of events and happenings relating to specific aspects of the struggle that won us freedom. Here, mention may be made of two of his hundreds of songs that inspired the people. In his popular poem "Vanu ain Kuhaaro", which was based on a Sindhi folk-tale, he gave a clarion call for the unity of the Indian people against foreign rule. The poem describes how a wooden handle yoked to an axe makes it possible for the latter to cut the whole tree into pieces. The moral rings sharp and clear in our mind's ear—that we should stand united. He says:

> It is the wooden handle
> a part of the tree
> which helps the axe to undo it:
> A whole is destroyed
> if its part is in league with the opponent.

His other poem "Tunhlnje Aita Jo Aavaaz" is addressed to Mahatma Gandhi, who led the struggle, and is included in its English translation by the present writer in *India's Struggle for Independence: Visuals and Documents* (NCERT, New Delhi, 1986) along with other archival records, patriotic songs and writings of various participants in it. The poet says:

> I heard the voice of your spinning wheel
> in huts and cottages:
> Everybody turned the spinning wheel on and on
> did so, and made balls of thread.
>
> I heard the voice of your spinning wheel in the Ashrams
> through it Hindus and Muslims
> knew the secret of your call for unity.
> All over India, the people heard the voice
> and heeded it
> and believed in one brotherhood.
>
> I heard about your support for Harijans
> in temples and shrines
> and among the pilgrims.
> Everybody supported the cause
> and embraced them.
>
> I heard, the secret of your spirituality
> was doing *karma*;
> I heard it from your autobiography.
> Everybody imbibed it and acted upon it.
>
> O Gandhi! I heard your name from atop the high *minars*;
> from the stars and planets.
> Everybody chanted it and remembered you.

As regards *Mushaahido* (Gandhidham Adipur, Kutch, 1987) another big collection of Hundraj Dukhayal's poetry after *Sangeetaanjali*, the entry on the book *is A Dictionary of Sindhi Literature* (New Delhi, 1996) says: "...It contains ghazals, geets, qaumi taraanaas, kaafis and saakhis written over the years. One is simply amazed at the creative energy the poet possesses. Marked by a rich variety of subjects and an earthy simplicity of style, it opens up new vistas of meaning in our day-to-day life."

Literally "The Vision", *Mushaahido* is poetry which is elevated or inspired, in contradistinction to verse, which it is not. The poet feels 'driven' to disrupt our habitual perception of things around us to see them as he "envisions" them. For instance, we see a sparrow in our everyday life, but he makes us "envision" her afresh:

> In our car on a run-away road
> we knew not
> how a sparrow found her way
> riding on the wings of wind.
>
> So young, so feeble
> she fluttered across from one window-screen
>   to another
> Nearly broke her delicate nose
>   and shrieked in pain.
>
> Just to let her go out
> I lowered the not-fully-shut window-screen
>   on my side
> Even as on the other, my companion,
>   wildly distraught with pain, did so,
>
> troubled, the sparrow changed the lane
> W-i-n-g-e-d desperately across the other two ones
> and almost died, weary of blind flights.
>
> At a loss as to what to do
> the chauffeur thought he should stop
> But the vehicles behind his
> Won't possibly permit him to take so huge a risk
>   for so tiny a thing.
>
> He also opened the window-screen on his side
> as the front-seater beside him did it, frantically.
> With the windows open on all sides
> the sparrow made her way
>   into the freedom of outside,

leaving us a-thinking
why on earth she entered the hell for her,
what made her come inside
if she had to face so much hardship in it...

Now these questions embodied in "why" and "what" are really very difficult to answer. Why did the sparrow enter the running car? What took her on that deadly, deathly flight? Did compassion play its role in saving her life? A familiar sight, the sparrow of the poem is marked by defamiliarisation: the poem makes the sparrow, a familiar object, to be as if she were not familiar. Film of familiarity (the term comes from S.T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*) blinds us to the wonders (for that matter, the wonderful meanings) of the world and Hundraj Dukhayal's *Mushaahido* aims at removing that film. The poet takes a look at fields and farmers, factories and workers, skies and clouds and shows them in the way we saw them anew, afresh. In his poem "Langro Kabootar", he empathetically looks at a lame pigeon in his house and solicits from us a look of sympathy for him:

No matter, the pigeon in my house
is lame on one foot;
he walks briskly.

It rains
and he dances,
    opening up his feathers
    to receive more and more of rain-drops on them.

When my elder brother gives him food
He would *gutergoo-gutergoo* others of the flock
    call them, to join him in the feast.

But alas.' It is more than a year now
and he remains companionless.
It seems, he has taken a vow
    of celibacy.

Dukhayal's poetry is essentially a domain inhabited by not only humans, but also by birds and beasts, flies and insects. It deals with the cosmos, perhaps is the cosmos itself, and celebrates unity of existence. Verily, it knows that we just can't do without accepting all in the scheme of things, really can't think of the well-being of man without that of other constituents in the universe. It is not for nothing that it concerns itself with men, women and children, flora and fauna, stars and planets in the one single universal set up — call it nature, creation or destiny — which we all inherit together. It gives as much importance to the sun as it does to a particle of dust, the latter reflecting the former and holding its identity. Nearer home the poet talks of men and dogs, dogs as men and men as dogs. In one of his poems he says:

> Right in the midway of the town
> whose dead body is it?
>
> A confused smear on the crossroad,
> an insect-eaten pulp,
> it stinks.
>
> Everyone holds one's nose
> avoids its bad smell
> and passes by.
>
> Social workers galore
> but no one arranges for its removal.
>
> Only a dog in a remote corner
> empathetically looks at it
> and shudders in his bones.
> He would perhaps meet the same death.
>
> Presently, a municipality official visits the place
> and gets it removed to the nearby lake.
>
> The lake's life-giving water is poisoned
> and injures the people's health to the extent
> that they try to bite, like mad dogs,
> each other's flesh off.

Like Shiva, the poet can be madly angry with man and call him names. A little irony at the end saves the poem from being a mere narrative on the sorry state of affairs today and hints at the situation where the people get the type of administration they deserve.

The poet has written in all the three major categories of poetry — narrative, dramatic and lyric. But it is in the lyric that he rejoices the most. It is his forte. And he takes up all these subjects naturally, as a duck takes to swimming effortlessly.

Hundraj Dukhayal's poetry is a cosmic dance of Shiva.

☐

Literary Research as National Integration: A Tribute to K.M. George

Jancy James

At a time when historical and genealogical study of literatures in India remained disorganized and confined to water-tight provincial compartments, K.M.George arrived on the scene with certain precision tools of discovery and organization revealing the treasures of *bhasha sahitya* to not only a national readership but also to an international scholarship. Dr. George's was an unprecedented literoscopy that threw light on a hitherto unexplored and unapplied critical vision, viz. Comparative Indian Literature. In the two huge volumes of *Comparative Indian Literature* that he prepared as the prestigious publication of Kerala Sahitya Akademi — both in English and Malayalam — he presented a mammoth reservoir of raw material for the comparative study of Indian regional writings. The contents are as rich and multifarious as the objective of his research was — the promotion of Indian literature through dissemination of information on them and their interpretation. He envisioned a vibrant literary academics that will compare, contrast and juxtapose the founts of expression towards a final discovery of the basic unity of Indian mind and thought. For the first time in Indian research history, vital information on bhasha sahitya that lay locked within linguistic confines was brought forth in English in an insightful and objective collation. Of course, he did something extra for the people of his native State — he brought out their Malayalam version too. He brought together in this task of promoting literary nationalism the best minds from all parts of the nation, who presented well-researched information on their native literatures. This remains a unique feat in the promotion of national solidarity through the discovery of the underlying unity of our culture through the diverse literatures of India. Above all, it was an all-time inspiring example of efficient organizing in literary scholarship and research. Dr. George was one of those who absorbed the patriotic intensity of cultural nationalism that was ushered into the Indian milieu at the beginning of the last century. He carried out the task of promoting it till the end of the century and beyond by means of an unprecedented literary nationalism. He wrote in his Forward to *Comparative Indian Literature*, "What is most easily understandable is the heterogeneity of our cultural expressions. What is most difficult to comprehend is its unity which is inward and conceptual". He wanted his work to be the guiding light in "this difficult journey from the concrete to the abstract". Dr. George was guided by the words of Jawaharlal Nehru which he loved quoting in his speeches. "It is certainly desirable that every person in India who claims to be educated should know something about languages other than his own. He should be acquainted with the classics and famous books written in those languages and thus imbibe into his being the broad and many-sided bases of India's culture". He did not hide his pride and sense of fulfillment in having worked in the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, with Pandit Nehru as its President and Dr.S.Radhakrishnan as the Vice-President.

Dr. George brought into literary research some meaningful criteria of analysis and classification. He made an in-depth study of literary movements which led him to introduce a new mode of comparativism in the study of Indian literature. The work he edited, *Literary History through Movements* (1958), is a pilot study in this area of research. In 1998 he brought out another work in meaningful continuation of the earlier one: *Modern Literary History through Movements.*

His work had the distinguishing marks of clarity, precision, sense of target and systematic organization. Literary vision and scientific methodology entered into a mutually enriching combination in his contributions. Perhaps his academic background of a First Class B.A. in Mathematics from Madras Christian College and ten years as an N.C.C. Officer helped him to acquire the exactness and discipline that stood him in good stead in his research projects. Incidentally, when dwelling on his educational background, it is interesting to mention that he was the first to receive a Ph.D. in Malayalam Literature. He did his doctorate without registering with a guide! Later in life, the University of Kerala conferred D.Lit. on Dr. George in recognition of the great service he rendered to language and literature.

His major contributions were in the field of scholarly and informative literature (*vyjnanik sahitya*). He alerted the lovers of literature to give due importance to *vyjnanik sahitya* alongside *sahitya vijnan* (literary scholarship). He deemed it his duty to spread the beauty and value of the literature of his mother tongue far and wide. Among his works in English, *A Survey of Malayalam Literature* (1968), *Western Influence on Malayalam Language and*

Literature, Ramacharitam and the Study of Early Malayalam (1956), *Place Names of South India,*and *Malayalam Grammar and Reader* (1971) are valuable discourses on the language and literature of Kerala which continue to be of great help to researchers all over the world. *A Survey of Malayalam Literature* is studied in many universities abroad as part of Asian Studies, and considered as the most useful guide and window to Malayalam literature by foreign learners of the language. Apart from *Comparative Indian Literature* (2 volumes) the other two major volumes Dr.George edited are *Modern Indian Literature – An Anthology* (3 volumes) – a selection of the prose, poetry and fiction of modern times; and *Masterpieces of Indian Literature* (3 volumes), a comprehensive collection of studies on the best five hundred pieces of literary creations and well-researched articles on their authors in India down the ages and a sample collection of short stories, poems and plays in English translation. These are publications that represent literary India proudly at any forum. He disclosed the motivation behind the publication of *Masterpieces of Indian Literature* : to bring out a collection on par with *Masterpieces of World Literature* and to remedy the crucial omission in this internationally reputed literary guide consisting of 2010 works, which has included just four works in Sanskrit and one English novel by R.K. Narayan as the only Indian literary masterpieces. Nearly two hundred writers were involved in the preparation of *Comparative Indian Literature*, six hundred for *Modern Indian Literature* and seven hundred for *Masterpieces of Indian Literature*. Dr. George's contribution in the creation of these massive texts is more than that of an editor. Each one of them is a brilliant demonstration of his organizational ability and perfection in time-bound work. No wonder, in his autobiography, *Enne Njan Kanumbol* (*As I see Myself*) the title of the chapter that contains the description of these works, is "Sanghadakan" (Organizer). Personally, as one closely associated with some of his publication projects including *Masterpieces of Indian Literature*, I have learnt from him many precious lessons of effective organization in academic work. He was known for completing every publication project that he undertook ahead of the time schedule. The first two volumes of the proposed twenty-volume Encyclopaedia in Malayalam was released when Dr. George was the head of the Department and Chief Editor of the Encyclopaedic Publications of the Government of Kerala.

He authored sixteen books in Malayalam as well, on language, literature and related topics. He wrote three travelogues, three biographies each in English and Malayalam and initiated a commendable mutual contribution between English and Malayalam through his translations. His critical studies on Biography and Translation continue to be significant contributions in these two genres of writings. A literary historian par excellence, he has also written critical essays on the works of eminent Malayalam writers like C.V.Raman Pillai, Kumaran Asan, Vallathol, Changampuzha and others. He did not hesitate to extend his interest and investigation to modern preoccupations. That Kali for Women brought out the first selection of women's writings in Malayalam under his leadership vouches for his easy acceptance even in the bastions of feminist thought. As one of his co-editors of this pioneer volume, I was deeply impressed by his eagerness to accommodate women's expression as a significant component of Malayalam literary history. He never considered himself too old to receive any new thought. He was a man of wide experience, being one of the most widely travelled Indian litterateurs of his generation. He served as Visiting Professor and Fellow in universities in the erstwhile Soviet Union, Hawai, Chicago, Texas and Edinburgh.

Dr. George was a much sought after speaker at literary and social forums in Trivandrum. What set him apart was his precise and short speeches, when many of the other speakers would embark upon lengthy verbal voyages. His home in Trivandrum was a haven for writers and researchers at any time of the day. The huge volumes prepared under his editorship adorned the small table in his drawing room, welcoming all those who called on him into a world of the thrills of literary research. Deeply human and compassionate, he treated those whom he interacted with in a very personal way. He worked on and for literature not only with his intellect but also with his heart and soul. Recipient of Padmashree (1988), Soviet Land Nehru Award (1987), Kerala Sahitya Akademi Fellowship (1989), Ezhuthachan Award (1996), Vallathol Award (1998) and Padmabhushan, awards and honours pursued him one after another in the last fifteen years of his life.

Questing through the literary treasures of India and providing information that will enthuse learners into further research was a passion that carried him through the various phases of his life. There was a fire in him that kept his personality aglow and lighted up the minds of those who associated with him—the fire of the zeal to learn and to store learning for posterity. He loved to engage himself perpetually in some research project till a few months before his unexpected demise on 19 November 2002. His last book *The Role of Sanskrit in the Development of Dravidian Languages and Literatures* was released in September 2002, barely two months before his death. The third volume of *The Encyclopaedia of World Literature* (in Malayalam*)*, published by the Institute of Encyclopaedia, Kerala, was released on 5 November 2002 by the Chief Minister by presenting the first copy to Dr. George, the veteran of encyclopaedic creations. He was weak and could not get on to the platform. The Chief Minister climbed down and handed over the volume to him. That was his last public appearance.

He passed away exactly two weeks later.

He cultivated a pan-Indian ambience in literary research celebrating the solidarity and inner bonding that Indian literary expression accomplished beyond the variety and diversity of our socio-cultural reality and linguistic repertoire. It is difficult to establish whether the love for Indian literature motivated him into related research and propaganda or long years of research in this field turned him out to be a passionate missionary of Indian unity.The matter and manner of his work invokes a genre of academic research that will supplement and compliment the hitherto incomplete process of national integration. The best way of paying homage to the memory of this great scholar is to receive and pass on the spirit of this unusual deviation from the unearthly and impersonal dynamics of literary research that Dr. George pioneered, as a precious legacy and a grave responsibility.

Joseph Mundassery, the celebrated Malayalam critic and scholar, once called him the 'Chartered Accountant of Malayalam Literature.' Dr. George accepted this attribute in the right spirit, making sincere efforts to retrieve and consolidate information from all literatures of the multilingual India across the ages, across linguistic divisions and geographical boundaries as though he had taken upon himself the mission of validating the statement of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan with whom he worked as the Assistant Secretary of Sahitya Akademi: "Indian literature is one though written in many languages".

❑

On Reading Masters: By Way of a Tribute to Yashpal

Debes Ray

Centenary celebrations cannot replace the habitation with writers in our dailiness. But it opens up a moment of review of our tradition. Tradition requires ever renewal, not to withstand the vagaries of our tropical weather only but to ensure the next season. To mark writers with rubrics is a practice with literary historians and they are always in short supply. Perhaps because of that they use supposedly indelible ink. An occasion like centennials is testing time for the rubric and the ink.

I need some justification for myself why I agreed to say something on the occasion of the centenary of Yashpal. Did I feel for a dialogue with the times of Yashpal and some of his other great contemporary storytellers? To be honest I should admit that for some years I am in unease over using the terms—short story writer and novelist. These do not represent me professionally. Somehow they seem like a make-up for a fixed role and that too fixed by others. I wished to be free. Nowadays I like to call myself a 'Kothowal'— a word taken from the dialect of the Rajbangshis of north Bengal who have created the alluvium of one kind of my stories. The word simply means a person who tells stories. The expected stories are not of mythical variety or of historical type in a long sense but are sparky and spoof, never grand, and always impish. This description of my job is not a guise. We have difficulties with our times to be grand and realist. To try to be so will look like a make-up.

I take this time to be the best of times to tell stories stripped of forms. But once during the thirties and forties of the last century some Indian novelists found out for themselves a grand Indian form of novelisation to

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Retouched version of the Presidential address delivered at the centenary seminar on Yashpal organized by the Sahitya Akademi.

construct their own times. Yashpal was one among them. These novelists cannot be read in isolation. I as one who likes to call himself a 'Kothowal' to underline my distance from them owe them an account of how do I read them. This essay intends to be that account. However, I will keep clear of the Bengali novels of the period for obvious reasons.

The generation of writers who created the form of modern Indian novel in the period roughly between 1925 and 50 were great visionaries and grand realists. These two qualities do not combine well particularly in the form of the novel as visions may sometimes be more real than reality and realism may sometimes be too stark for a vision. It happened to some of these masters leading to a grave and deep tragic sense. Kumaran Asan, Sankara Kurup, Sivashankara Pillai, Shivaram Karanth, Khandekar, Kalindicharan Panigrahi, Gopinath Mohanti, Umashankar Joshi, Premchand, Yashpal, Ahmed Ali—we discover a process of indigenous creativity in fiction marginalizing any kind of foreign influence. The skeletal structure of their narrative is so strong, ancient, varied, complex, physical and rooted in the soil and the stories are peopled by so many true men and women, children and animals, woods and rivers and seas that all alien elements, if there be any, become irrelevant or indecipherably assimilated or an integer of the form itself. I will read three Indian novelists with you, namely Premchand, Yashpal and Karanth, to bring my point home and guess our relationship with them.

II

First I read Premchand. In his great novel *Godan* Premchand feigns a humility which is historically associated, even if mistakenly, with the peasants. By this gesture of the novelist he subterfuges himself as a character of the novel. The novelist is detached and tells his story in a slow pace. The story is not a construct, nor a build-up. It's simply an unwrapping of a scroll which at the end, or even at any moment of rendition, may be wrapped up again. This uncertainty creates a chink through which irony intrudes to make sham of realism. But the narration becomes so super-detailed that the reader is again led to the trap of realism. Changes in events take place so rapidly that the storyline goes blurred. We are not sure if the story is about a family, or a 'protagonist', or a village, or a community, or some relationships. With a reader habituated in European novels Premchand may seem to be unsettled with his form. Only with its progress the story is formed. Hori and his family have emerged as the form itself. And even as per European codification this emergence may be identified as one of the greatest exercises of critical realism. But Premchand breaks through the code by the strength of his unrelenting awesome detailing. In the process the details become bizarre. We, who are more at ease with European novels than Indian novels may suffer a claustrophobia in reading Premchand, similar to our reading experience with Dostoyevsky and Kafka. But Premchand has a spiraling cunning as a novelist in a colonized territory. He hides the fact of his being that much of critical realist by positing himself on constant removes from his story. His ruralscape consistent with horse-humour creates a counter-milieu of a false relief and the irony enters the soul of the novel with increasing crescendo of actuating the very ordinariness of his story. The form is formed with an unfinalised finale. In this context the stories of Mehta, Khanna, Malati, Khurshed, Tankhar etc. may seem disintegrated and may even lead us to suspect Premchand's discomfort with this group of social strata. But a long cohabitation with the novel may now reveal at any moment of reading that these people are themselves inadequate for the form. This form does not assimilate them as they are marginal to Hori's world. This apparent inadequacy sharpens the irony— even Hori's story can marginalize social strata that validate itself as a surrogate ruling class in a colony.

From this point I will leave Premchand, most unwillingly, as he offers himself to re-readings and re-readings with rare and profound openness. I have planned this essay to enter Yashpal particularly at this point.

We now read Yashpal's *Jhut aur Sach*. The social strata marginalized in Hori's story of Premchand dominate here in a sub-continental spread. The city of Lahore itself with its various mohallas, roads, streets, lanes, bye-lanes, shortcuts, civil spaces, familial spaces, administrative blocks, suddenness of a feeling of search for localization with religious particularity, rash ruination of habitual relationships, crazy snapping of inherited sensibilities, gushy eruption of never-before-known bonding glues, inane amnesia of a long-lived neighbourliness, losing the ways and quick discovery of long forsaken alleyways, the lived-in mapping of the city superimposed by threat of death and everybody's reason of death-fear as different from the other, roads and mohallas avoided communally, dialects and the parole lost—this is the protspatium, the space as the protagonist, of Yashpal's narrative *Jhut aur Sach*. As per European code use of space in the narrative is a post-realist format, as we read in Mann, Kafka and Camus. In the European novels of that categorization, the city is a besieged city, be it Mann's sanatorium, Kafka's castle or Camus' desert town. Yashpal's Lahore is a space which is being ruined to make space for an invading outsider time that by propelling a siege within is demarcating the inside and the outside of the city with a doubtful historical authentication. The form is formed with innumerable discourses across the social, political and religious strata. The discourses are centering on topical politics and political topics. Time is surely bad when people in the ordinariness and dailiness of their life have to talk history. The existential need of anonymity of the mass is corrupted irretrievably involving them in a fabricated dialogic relation with the self-proclaimed makers of history and religions. History is never a dummy run, nor a time-tabled run. It is made only after it is made. When the process of history is made explicit by intervention, a long and prolonged series of implosions go on. It was so during the two world wars of the last century and it is so when countries are singled out to wreck in this three-and-half years old present century.

Yashpal digs out these interventions and resulting implosions. In his novel the people enters into a nemesis in the processes of time and discourse. In his two other earlier novels *Dada Kamrid* and *Deshadrohi* Yashpal is himself interventionist and punctual.

Jhut aur Sach moves him from the temporal to the terrainial. That space is again located in a city where the terrain is defended against the stupendous attack of the temporal from outside as the mythical cities of Lanka and Troy were defended.

Yashpal creates this illusion and makes us sustain the belief as a fact that his city Lahore is outside history. The fact that a city with Lahore's past and present can be imagined to own a present outside history is the crevasse through which iron enters the soul. I remember an event in the novel. Some arrests were made for rioting and arson. The police put up a case. Some of the accused were released by the court 'within half an hour'. Cases against some were deferred. There is a one-sentence information, apparently only a detail, but indispensable to mark the temporal occupying the terrain:

> Poori was arrested during arson when fire was blazing in Bajajhatta and Machhihatta and it was dangerous for the police to take the arrested persons to thana by that road. The police had made a de tour to Kotowali by Rangmahal-Delhi Darwaza road.There is no fire now. So after their release they take Sahalmis Road.

I will read another story, a short story, by Yashpal to see his preoccupation with space. There are many such stories and there is no other reason to go for this particular story, "A Holy War" than its immediate availability. It is about how riot broke out in a bye-lane Gangu-ki-Gali. Three people are located in their ancient space—Moolan Tai, a Hindu widow landlady of very small means, Fazzay, the dyer and his son Nasru:

> This shop which was six feet long and four feet wide was also their home. There were many ropes tied on the roof of Fazzay's

> [illegible] shop. These were now bare. In normal times they would dye turbans,sarees and chunnies, scatter mica on them and starch them and hang them separately on these linen-lines to dry.

This is Yashpal's space—the sky has lost its hues.Through the story Yashpal takes a route to the underground space.

> Lying in that closed and narrow hole of their room Fazzay and Nasru were wet with perspiration. They had taken off their kurta and tehemad and were lying in their langot…Neither of them could sleep due to humid heat….Nasru got irritated as his back was glued with the mat by the perspiration of his own.

Now, in that space where the sky is utterly bereft of human panachrome, the night has lost its sleep and the human body is a sacrilege soaked in its own waste, a foul murder is going to take place, almost as a footnote to a joke as if enough foul and enough murders had not taken place already.

I will leave Yashpal's claustrophobic space to go for Sivaram Karanth's south Kannada coast which territorially is the west coast of the Karnataka state. In this novel, *Marali Mannige* (Return to Earth), the Chaturvarna of the Hindus are shattered to an existential meaninglessness in their fight against the sea to keep up a living however meagre. Oital, the male head of the family and a practising Brahmin with yajamans has to nurse the seedlings, carry them in bundles on his shoulder to the field for replantation, irrigate his land by manually operating a dun, estimate the market by counting the boats from the deeper islands and jump in the sea to catch hold of branches, boughs and, if so lucky, large beams. These are not the jobs of a Brahmin, as per the shastras and the social norms. Karanth destroys the Chaturvarna concept so totally that this poor Brahmin, Rama Oital has been made to catch hold of a horn of a dead buffalo taking that to be a huge beam of wood. With this wrecking of the Brahmin's status and bringing him down to the status of a sudra, Karanth advances to create the feminist space of the novel with Paroti and Sarosi. The former is the wife and the latter is the widowed sister. They have been made into a throbbing presence through the narrative by a massive detailing of their never-ending daily chores like collecting dry sticks as fuel, or stocking dry leaves for the rains or walking twenty-five miles a day to collect green mangoes to prepare *achar* as dressing to their otherwise scanty meals.

III

I would like to clear my sense of notional direction. I am not replacing writing with telling. These are formally different. At least presently, I do not share Benjamin's sequencing of storytelling followed by short story. When Benjamin says, 'The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual,' he has in his mind only Europe and he consciously simplifies his Europe to speak of the meaning of writing a novel is to 'carry the incommensurable to extremes'. In our societies to write a novel means a celebration of a collective life. All the great masters of Indian fiction—Bankimchandra, Rabindranath, Premchand, Karanth, Bashir, Fakirmohan, Gopinath, Mulk Raj, Narayan, Tarashankar, Bibhutibhushan, Manik et al always connected and collected the commensurable to a centre. Even now such modern narrators as Afsar Amed, Arundhati Roy, Thoppil Md Meeran, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar and others are eager to find out the commensurable items of Indian life hidden under traditional and on coming protocols of quotidian life. This is not a selective list but only an index of my hidden proposition that the form of the novel is different in India.

But on the other hand, I would like to take cue from Benjamin that storytelling, not writing, contains 'the epic side of truth, wisdom'. Through the period of our colonized life we developed a modernity of our creativity, which now in hindsight seems to be an ever-extending space with intermingling currents, changing skylines, rotating humanscapes and shifting earth base. It was not the result of intervention by any 'unconscious tool of history' (Marx), nor a part of any 'Imperial narrative' (Said). The colonial powers behaved diversely in the colonies. There were distinguishable divergences among and within the powers in time and space. There were divergences in the reception and reaction pattern of the colonised. Indian people could save its dialects and languages, which the countries to the south and the west of the Sahara could not. What then seemed to be unmitigated collaboration by the elite Indians now seems to have contained strange semiotics of refusal. This happens especially in creative endeavours.

I have posited the Indian fiction not to locate a place for Yashpal on the occasion of his centenary. I am rather finding myself dislocated both from the novel and my territory of living. As such the master writers whom I talked about could place their novels in such a terrain or time, which they may call their own. But I have no such time to call my own, neither any living space. So I do not have the capacity to be the recipient of the novelistic form, perfectly Indian. On the other hand, I cannot identify any time or any terrain or any daily compulsion as clearing of bowels or any habitual copulation with a known partner or even urination as my own, even not my body, and not even my womb. Everything private is glorified and exoticated in its use value. Only the other day an airline was in news for designing their in-flight loo in the shape of well made-up open female lips, to suggest a gesture of oral sex. We are full with shattered stories told in the newspaper or on the television screen or in innumerable advice columns and talk shows. These are my quantifiable desire and measurable outfit.

So, in my respect to the masters and to myself, I should not call myself a novelist. I would like the illegible designation of a storyteller i.e. a Kothowal.

The Changing Configurations of the Indian Short Story: Sites, Space and Semantics

Tania Mehta

To fit the definition of the short story into a mould or to explain it by giving definitions would circumscribe the whole idea of what a short story is. Tracing the genesis of the story, in any culture or in the history of any literature, may again be a difficult task. What then is a short story and what is its space? How do we understand a short story? Listing the ingredients of a short story could be a difficult if not an impossible task. The definition of a short story may be diffusive and expansive, but one does in some inexplicable way, understand and experience what a short story is. When one talks of short story, the pre-fix 'short' becomes problematic in many ways. If the word 'short' becomes a marker of length then the wide and loose definition of a short story would be very simplistic and misleading. One would rather move on to a more pertinent question of what does a short story do? How do we and why do we relate to a short story in a very vital and intimate way? The short story probably captures the shimmerness of any experience—a slice, something partial but where the slice and the partial becomes something of a 'whole' in itself. When one talks of experience, one is talking of an experience which is intense, which defies categorization and evaluation, as small or big, important or trivial. It is an experience which is there.

Experiencing the past reliving it, is done through small stories, through small fragmented, fractured narratives. We live Life and experience Experiences in short narratives. Life and its constituent experiences can never be a long narrative but a mosaic of short ones, which we keep reconfiguring through wish and memory. We visualize our wishes, hopes, and fears through stories. We also recall and reconstruct in varied ways the vitals of life experiences through short, broken narratives. Passing of grievances and victories is transmitted through stories. When someone is dead, away, lost, we gather and recall this in stories – that is a true recalling – for in telling their stories, we call them back to speak and move among us again.

The short story is like a visible nucleus, where the protons, neutrons and electrons surround it but are not visible. There is a rich plethora of meanings that the short story encodes within itself. It invites us to an expansion of the meaning from the essence rather than from the meaning to the essence. The feelings of our experiences, our subjectivities do not flow out in one huge volcanic outpour but in little splintered bursts of stories. Every story is filigreed with something special, something indestructible. It becomes like a form of energy which cannot be destroyed—is there like us and our consciousness. We link to each other, the outside world and the world within, through stories. The tone of a short story is at once close to that of shared confidence, even occasionally confession, as if the moments we recall from certain short stories arise from our own experience. The short story can express the most difficult, paradoxical unparaphrasable truths of life as it is actually lived. It is through stories that we have a variety of human perceptions about our world and reality.

There have been many attempts to define the short story by distinguishing it from other forms of fiction, by explaining why it is not a sketch, a fairy tale or a myth. Somerset Maugham claimed that many of Chekhov's great stories were anecdotes and not proper stories at all. The best of Hans Anderson stories are as carefully constructed as deeply layered, as elaborately crafted as the stories of Hawthorne and Poe. Writers like Henry James felt that a short story "must be an idea" —it cannot be a story in the vulgar sense of the word. He felt that it must be a picture; it must illustrate something of the real essence of the subject. Today, the short story, however defies any such definitions.

Indian art of story telling is not easy to define or theorize, because of the mind-baffling range of stories that the Indian mind has lived through centuries. This does not give way to any monologic or essential zed frame, which we might describe as patently 'Indian'. In an age of 'instant culture', globalization and porous boundaries, it becomes very difficult to understand and define culture. In fact, the very term 'Indian' is problematic as India is not a culturally homogenous nation space. India, to use Bakhtin's terms, is an eternal carnival of many voices. It has an organic history of more than two thousand years, but at the same time this history has been punctured and intervened and mediated by other histories too. If the past is so checkered then its narratives cannot be linear and monotonous.

What is Indian 'short story' then? Can there be anything as monolithic and homogenously defined thing called 'Indian.' There are no straight answers to these questions. Critical terms such as *Katha, itihas, gatha* and *akhyayika* are frequently invoked to trace the origin of Indian short story to Vedic times. Indologists valourize the grand-narratives of the *puranas* as the source of short story. Normally we hold the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as our grand narratives, as perhaps narratives of *Bharat.* Moreover, there were alternate traditions and sites of story telling, *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* fables being some examples. Foregrounding the Indian short story in the indigenous oral narrative tradition or traditions does not adequately explain its contemporaneity and even its subsequent historical development. Narration is the ultimate test to determine the difference in cultural make up. There is so much variety and heterogeneity in Indian short story that it does not fall into any exclusive category. The problem of defining Indian short story becomes all the more confounding as folk tales associated with different geo-cultural regions of India cannot be overlooked. A.K. Ramanujan says:

> —thus the folktales of a culture have a number of contrasting tales that are in dialogue with each other. Each kind of tale has special characteristics, its own "chronotype", if one wishes to invoke Bakhtin.[1]

Is folk Indian? The question seemingly might appear highly inappropriate. But if Indian is defined in terms of the dominant Sanskritic culture, folk definitely falls beyond the purview of Indian. *Desivadi* critics object to the clubbing of folk with the so called Indian. These critics draw a subtle difference between the local and the national. Refusing the assimiliationist paradigm of *margis,* these critics demand an autonomous status for little traditions that stem from specific local matrices. These little traditions have their own specific narratology, structural topology and sociology, which not only pre-dates Sanskrit literature but perhaps outmatch it in terms of depth as well as range. What M.H. Abrams, says in the context of the regional novel, is perhaps true of the regional short story too. He says:

> The regional novel emphasizes the setting, speech and social structure and custom of a particular locality not merely as local colour but as important conditions affecting the treatment of character and their ways of thinking feeling and interacting.[2]

Spatially the folk stories go beyond the regions, takes different shades and lineages, histories of the stories may be difficult to trace. It crosses regional boundaries, cultures and languages. Short story by its very nature tends to be deconstructive, as it does not aim at totalizing experience the way the novel or the epic does. Each story takes its own category and its own peculiar form—peculiar because it cannot be bracketed with the form of any other story.

Besides *desi* and *margi*, there is a *videshi* dimension to Indian story. It would be critically lop-sided to locate the dynamics of Indian story only in the ancient and medieval periods of nation's history. Indian story must be seen as a continuous process. The generic mutations Indian story has undergone during this period of cultural upheaval, have to be underlined. *Videshi*, here, implies essentially colonial, which historically speaking is now a part of our collective unconscious. It does not stand for something absolutely alien or remote to shared experience or history. One cannot, however agree with the Western critics, who subordinate short story to the novel and consider it just a minor off-shoot of the novel. Modern Indian short story is a mixture of the *desi, margi,* and *videshi* streams of the art of story-telling. In other words one might describe contemporary Indian short story as cultural site of three Indias—temporally speaking, ancient, medieval, and colonial, contesting, complementing and dialoguing with each other to generate a vision for the future or immediate present.

It needs to be kept in mind that 'Indian art' or 'Indian story' is only used as a convenient label to bring forth the various dimensions of story telling or narratology. These stories offer a fathomless reservoir of configurations which modern day creative writers dwell on. Narratives are complex, judgments can never be subjective, tastes differ and rules seldom hold. Short story has evolved as a full-fledged autonomous unit of fiction writing. Novel can never be representative of the vast sub-continent which is full of sub-cultures, groups, languages, dialects and religions. Both in terms of its horizontal expansion and vertical depth, short story has eclipsed the novel. Short story like all other texts has its own unconscious and is more complex than it looks on the surface. It opens up different worlds to the reader, and captures different planes of consciousness.

In the beginning, the short story remained tied to the apron strings of the grand narratives of religion, spirituality, universalism, nation etc—in terms of its vision and thematic sweep—the narratives hitherto reserved for the serious and sustained enterprise of fiction called 'the novel.' The short story was denied the independent poetics. Tagore's short stories offer us a broad perspective on the configuration that the short story had acquired at the end of the nineteenth century in Bengal. In his famous story "The Kabuliwalah" (1892), the fact that a Bengali girl in the story strikes friendship with an alien Afghan is an evidence enough of the writer's own notion of universal brotherhood across nation or sub-national diversities. Short story first highlighted the difference and diversities, but as it moved towards its climax, the hangover of assimilianist nationalism began to dominate.

Under the spell of the progressive movement in the Hindi belt in particular, short story becomes an instrument of ideological warfare. Power structures manned by the ruling elite are confronted and challenged. Premchand's arrival on the scene, gave the short story, a new definition. His stories are moral metaphors—a statement about what ought to matter. The writer does not believe in any single mode of liberation. Premchand's story "Kafan" is a landmark story. It is a portrayal of the level of helplessness that the low caste poor face in rural India. "Kafan" takes the art of short story writing to a level of mature critiquing, as it, unlike many other stories of the writer, does not end on a note of sentimental idealization or rhetorical sermonizing. Instead of politicizing the usual Thakur-Chamar, caste-class binary, Premchand focuses singularly on the two Chamars, who are eternal borrowers. Normally the short story is expected to chart the course of self-regeneration or self-discovery. In this story the chamars remain contemptible 'idlers'. The characters are not shown to be heading towards a tragedy—the story begins on a tragic note and the note is sustained with utmost pathos. The way the chamars resign to their fate is poignant indeed. They eat away the money lent for the shroud of the son's wife. They had already conquered feelings of 'accountability', and 'infamy'. Their state is a plane admission of their social position. There is nothing transcendental about the pain of the two. The stories of Premchand mark the beginning of the modern consciousness in Hindi short story. He takes the art of short story in Hindi to a level of mature critiquing and consciousness-raising. The metaphor of the village is used but the region ceases to be an isolated, insulated parochial entity. It becomes a part of a wider world.

It is interesting to see how the Indian short story sometimes departs from the generic rules to accommodate local imperatives. Writers like Raja Rao, operate within the puranic paradigms. In his preface to *Kanthapura,* he describes the poetics of story telling in terms of 'sthalpuran', a local offshoot of the puran. Novel as Bakhtin says, has a larger canvas, capable of a carnivelesque representation of reality. This is not to say that the short stories do not have a dialogic structure or polyphonic sub-texts. *Sthalpuran* as the very term *sthal* denotes, invokes a local landscape or a local legend. The framing of the story as *sthalpuran*—as it happens in Rao, does not suggest a non-creative or non-active revival of ancient formats. His stories move in the field where the pulls of tradition and the pulls of modernity operate—a tension generated and that becomes a zone of creativity. Rao's stories can be read as a meta story, half story, retelling of a folklore and sometimes as a critical rewinding of history. Stories re-write myths, legends and epics.

Rewriting through these stories becomes more an act of re-inventing the archaic, rather than asserting the interpretation of the present. Rao's stories become partly mythical, partly historical or even partly autobiographical—mythical stretched to accommodate history—history, which is personal or national. The short story here becomes diachronic and sometimes imbibes the elements of myth and the chronicle, without identifying itself to either.

In Urdu, the short story in the hands of writers likes Manto takes a real leap forward. It penetrates beneath the external aspect of reality as it endeavours to grapple with existential and psychological dimensions of human lives. Manto's stories enable us to look critically at history, nation, politics, sex, and some of our assumptions about them. Manto's partition stories proved beyond doubt that a tragedy as colossus as partition does not necessarily require a bigger canvas of a novel to represent the magnitude of displacement and communal violence. Partition was more of a vertical split rather than a horizontal divide. The short story becomes a befitting medium of this split and portrays contemporary reality in all its complexity. In "Toba Tek Singh," Manto chooses to highlight the absurdity of partition through the perspective of lunatics in Indian and Pakistani asylums—a perspective that is hardly taken note of in the official 'sane' construction of reality. Short story becomes a medium for the 'insane', the victim, rather than for the victimizer. The lunatics across communities fail to understand the politics of the sane and the wise. As soon as they receive the news of the creation of Pakistan and Hindustan, they feel deceived and lost and are confused about the nationality of their lunatic space. When the narratives of the nation fail, the short story comes into being. Breaking free, Bishan Singh anchors himself in the no man land, which, he believes is Toba Tek Singh. He does not budge and ultimately dies at the same spot. The short story thus emerges as the narrative of the no man's land.

Short Story is the genre, which delves deep into the veiled. The spatial dynamics of the story narrows down to the bed in the hand of seasoned writers like Ismat Chughtai. And all this happens in 1940s, much before radical French feminism hit the Indian shore. Female sexuality could not come out in the open so easily, it had to break open only through with a jerk in the form of a short story. The short story becomes the instrument not of revolutions, or of radical second comings but of jerks and tremors that stem from deep emotional wounds, tremors that cause noticeable troughs and highs on the cultural seisomograph. Ismat's stories like the "Quilt", enter the forbidden territory of female sexuality, lending the genre a subversive character. The story falls short of giving explicit details of lesbian love but the fact that it could make quilt as its central metaphor was quite a leap forward. What was hitherto just an allegory to perpetuate the order of morality becomes an instrument to unsettle conventional morality.

Any account of Indian short story needs to be located in the colonial past as well as neo-colonial present. For much more than mythical origin, it is the political history and the power politics, which has given such an edge to the short story today. The short story becomes an authentic form and is being used as a tool of activism—becoming the battleground of subaltern histories. Short stories of writers like Mahashweta Devi become potent sites of mutiny and resistance. Here the short story emerges as the medium of the subaltern politics/poetics. Mahashweta Devi's stories are counter discourses, where the traditional brahmanical archetypical constructs are interrogated and challenged. She shows how the process of globalization can lead to various forms of cultural oppression, discrimination, exploitation and an undesirable standardization of cultures. K. Satchidanandan makes a relevant comment in this context. He says:

> As the ideologies of the open and free market society celebrate the triumph of free speech and of knowledge, more and more parts of culture become expropriated, copyrighted and priced and thus becomes scarcer day by day. Humanity is becoming mono-acculturated, leading to the erosion of diversity. Reality is getting digitalized and all languages are under threat from the common technocratic jargon, propagated by the international capital networks. The realm of the culture is being torn between the tendencies of globalization and localization.[3]

The meta-state represented by transnational corporations is striving to create an asymmetric and illusionary internationalism based purely on the patterns of economic assumption to the detriment of national culture. Mahashweta questions the whole idea of 'modernity' and linear progress. The short story undergoes revision and rupture, penetrating deep beneath the external aspects of reality as it endeavours to grapple with existential and psychological dimensions of human living. Short stories of Dalit writers across the languages demand space for the incorporation of their voices, the voices which have been in conflict with the Brahmanical canon. We live in a world where the very ease of communication has become the greatest barrier to meaningful communication. Instead of improving the situation, knowledge retrieval schemes and computerized monstrosities have only made it worse. There has been a new sharing of power and it is obvious how the genre like the short story can destabilize the literary canon in a way. We see the short story break away from the classical grids as it becomes an instrument of assertion and identity. The short story today, does away with the moral and mythical hangover. There is an urgency of self-introspection and self-reflexivity. The short story has realized its full potential in the present times.

Its existence has always been vital but never so dynamic and pressing. The short story explores the complex dynamics associated with the context. The modern short story upholds doubt and searching; remoulding idiom to face the new challenges of history, a new awareness of space and time and the metaphysical anguish. The romantic idiom was inadequate to articulate the new perceptions of life in the context of urbanization and globalization. Short story writers like Nirmal Verma and U.R. Anantha Murthy, explore the complexities of the world that they live in, portraying the dilemmas that a contemporary man finds himself confronted with. At the same time their stories have not abandoned their transhistorical mission to contemplate over the eternal questions of life, death, love, belief and redemption. Short stories of writers like Basheer and Zacharia are complex, with powerful metaphysics built into them. If we scratch beneath the surface of the stories of Basheer, the idea of the 'nation' is nothing more than the constructive details of the lives of ordinary people, caught in the timeless act of living and dying and laughing endlessly about the enigma of existence. Writers like R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, portray the ordinary and the 'everydayness' of life. It may be an impossible task to bring into fold short stories across languages and regions to show how both in terms of its horizontal expansion and vertical depth, the short story has eclipsed the novel.

The random references to the so called 'popular' and the 'canonized' stories and their writers, mentioned above show the changing configurations of the Indian short story. There is such a rich reservoir of Indian stories across different languages and various cultures that it is impossible to consider them in the framework of a brief essay. Fleeting references have been made to some of the writers but that is like touching the tip of the ice-berg. They do in some way represent various peaks in their own languages so to say and may be considered mile-stones in the development of the Indian short story. No attempt was made for a microscopic scrutiny, only a broad frame of reference was adopted to suggest new directions in the changing semantics of the Indian short story. A rich plethora of local stories across regions, lost and unheard, wait as vast treasures to be excavated, and experienced—treasures which lie hidden and wrapped in India's various linguistic zones. On account of the lyrical and the microcosmic aspects of the short story, translation may be difficult. Lot is being written in the languages but very little gets translated. The translations are used which may delete native word and expressions, which are vessels that carry discordant ideologies, social values and religious beliefs. It is true that the dialogic and dialectic language of the specific region resist translation, yet one has to step into their world through translations. Not written by Poe's rule of 'single effect', ignoring Aristotle's dictum of the three unities, the short story combines so many strands in a narrative framework that it leaves a lot of scope for re-writing and re-interpretation. Short stories are complex with very powerful metaphysics built into them. The changes that have taken place today are not just a matter of technique but of vision and the new vision demand a new mode of expression. The contradictory strands lead to compositions, where ends are always lose and may be stretched in many directions. Roland Barthes, in another context makes a pertinent observation, showing how the latter day writers can re-institute new meanings from the rich reservoir of stories available. He says:

> The variety of stories from different regions, cultures and languages, thus combines the mythical, the historical and the autobiographical with the moral and the metaphysical to generate a discourse of ambiguity.[4]

It is so true in the Indian context. Several interpretations are possible and each interpretation has serious consequences for our cultural development. To renew language, to say the unsaid, to reveal what the other discourses conceal, to discover the unexpected, to go beyond the surface, to be rooted and yet be free—lies in the domain of the short story.

It is interesting to see how the short story re-configures itself, ever evolving, ever changing, and moulds and regenerates itself, consciously, unconsciously to radar the turmoil, social, political and economic. It images experience, consciousness-raising, polyphonic voices of various Indias, exploring and searching randomly the various landscapes of the geo-cultural. The story is undergoing a renewal through the stories of tribals, the dalits, of women, of the eco-conscious and who in different ways are critics of the caste-class gender hegemony that still stand in the way of the full realization of democracy in India. No two short stories are identical—each story has its own genesis in some gender, class caste, religion, ethnicity and politics. If the story is not written within strict generic rules and spills into areas it is itself oblivious of, so the criticism to decode the stories has to be creative as well. No unified theory of criticism can hold in a multicultural society. Judging the Indian short story by alien paradigms would be unfair. One has to see where the Indian short story has its 'native' centre. Stories across regions would reveal how the short story has a spectrum of narrative forms, which cannot be spelt in any reductive frame of theory. New strategies, sensitive to the cultural difference, have to be developed. What is needed is a new aesthetics of the short story encompassing all the divergent cultural pulls and forces that the short story over a period of time has undergone. Commenting on the working definition of aesthetics, Kumau Brathwaite observes, "The aesthetics is a cultural communal sense of one's culture."[5] Stories are a continuous and evolving dialogue, a creative interaction among different languages, cultures and sections of the people, where opposing cosmologies and world views do not get annihilated. Our existence as a nation depends on these varied and diverse voices heard through short narratives. Local cultural identities, world views, cultures can only be transmitted sensitively through the medium of short narratives, Today, in post colonial India, where languages have been eclipsed by the administration, educational and cultural states, the social relevance of the short story can be seen to nurture languages/culture, showing heterogeneous ground realities, not naively aspiring to totalize experience. It can be seen as a celebration of diversity—becoming a site where 'culture', 'language' 'moment' asserts itself the best. It is essential for India to develop a democratic discourse against large collective and hegemonic formations in order to provide the long needed space to minority interests, marginalized sections, subaltern groups, tribal languages and sub-cultures. Short story confronts the various hegemonies and asserts and evolves it's various identities through different tones/zones, cultures and languages to counter the engulfing acts of homogenization of 'universal' (global) culture to show alternate worlds and world views.

Short story can be an alternate to theory. It spills into areas and directions which even the theory, with its rigour of argument and counter-argument cannot anticipate. In fact, the short story raises its head against the very notion of a genre. It does not conform to the rules of the genre but questions the existence of such a notion. The short story today transgresses the previously valid rules off the genre. It does not enter any genre except its own. Stories create visions which are of use to a pluralistic society. The Indian short story can be seen as the product of configurations in philosophy, aesthetic, economic and political life of the country. This genre is still alive in the wake of the multi-national television culture. It is a genre that is here to stay, continuously regenerating itself as a living culture does. It remains unpredictable and charts its own path. It is the wild colt, which cannot be tamed— unleashing its energy, and enjoying the magic of its own movement.

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The Prey

R. Narendra Prasad

Scene 1

[A one-room rented house. A door each on the left and the right. The door on the left opens on to the street, and as it does, so the street sounds come in. On the right a desk, or table, with a stove and a few inexpensive vessels on it. A small cot upstage centre, with a mattress rolled up. A tin box underneath the cot. Used clothes hanging on the cot railing. A canvas chair beside the cot.

As the curtain rises, Ramankutty, thirty years of age, is seated on the cot, drinking tea. His wife Sheela, twenty-five, is sitting on the canvas chair.

Sheela gets to her feet, moves to the street door and opens it. The street sounds come in.]

Ramankutty : Close it.

[Sheela shuts the door and moves back. Ramankutty hands over the tumbler to her. Sheela places it on the kitchen desk and pours tea from a small aluminium vessel. There is half a glass of tea. She drinks it. She moves toward right with the glass tumbler, comes back with the washed tumbler and puts it on the desk. Ramankutty lights a beedi. He moves over to the chair and sits down. Then picks up a magazine and begins to flip through the pages. Wiping her hands dry with her saree, Sheela snatches the magazine from his hands and throws it down on the cot. Then she sits down on the cot. Ramankutty holds her hand and tries to make her happy. Sheela pulls her hand back, gets up and walks toward the door on the left. Now she opens the door. The sounds of the street. Ramankutty moves over to her and stands at her back with his hands on her shoulders. Now they move back.]

Ramankutty : Yesterday my duty was over at eight. I queued up to buy a coupon for the last bus. But the last coupon was sold to the man right in front of me.

Sheela : That's how it is all the time! [*Laughs*]

Ramankutty : I've decided not to queue up for anything any more.

Sheela : It's the second time after our marriage that I spend the night alone. Must have lost two kilos.

Ramankutty : When was the first time?

Sheela : The day you fell unconscious at the company. Remember how all your friends brought me back here from the hospital?

Ramankutty : That's true. But what about my lying there at the bus stand with all those bugs biting me clean?

Sheela : And what about my lying here alone listening to all those foul-mouthing drunkards walking by the street? [*She laughs. Ramankutty picks up the magazine again.*]

Sheela : There was again a big commotion at Sarojini's house today. Lots of men shouting, 'Open the door, you slut!'

Ramankutty : We should find another house.

[*Sheela gets up and moves over to the kitchen table. She takes some rice from a tin and puts it to soak in water. Now she comes back, wiping her hands with her saree.*]

Ramankutty : Where there is less noise and trouble. With a little courtyard and a couple of plants. And a little compound all around.

Sheela : Nice plan, but—

Ramankutty : I'm asking around. . . Ho! This is impossible!

Sheela : Let me tell you, if the rent goes up it'll be a problem.

Ramankutty : I may get a hike.

Sheela : Oh! Will you?

Ramankutty : The price of things may go down a bit.

Sheela : Oh! Will it?

Ramankutty : Those who have completed five years may be given a grade.

Sheela : Oh! Will they? [*Lights the stove*] Chetta! [*Puts the vessel of rice on the stove*] Aren't you there? Chetta!

Ramankutty : Eh? [*Sheela is absorbed in the cooking*] You can't believe it, can you?

Sheela : Oh, what's the use getting such things!

[*Pause*]

Ramankutty : We'll buy vegetables every day.

Sheela : O-ho!

Ramankutty : Every day we'll buy milk.

Sheela : O-ho!

Ramankutty : Aubergine, cucumber, cauliflower.

Sheela : [*Encouraging him*] Aah!

Ramankutty : Beans, pumpkin, onions.

Sheela : O-ho. . . Aah!

Ramankutty : Eggs, sweets, cabbages.

Sheela : [*Moving toward him, clapping her hands*] O-ho! Sweets!

Ramankutty : A movie a week.

Sheela : Aah!

Ramankutty : A saree for you every month.

Sheela : A saree for me every month.

Ramankutty : An underskirt to match.

Sheela : A second pair of shirt and mundu.

Ramankutty : A packet of Carefree.

Sheela : A steel razor.

Ramankutty : Ice cream at the park.

Sheela : O-ho!

Ramankutty : An autorickshaw when it turns dark.

Sheela : A little transistor radio.

Ramankutty : A little table.

Sheela : A little chair.

Ramankutty : A little new mattress.

Sheela : And then—

Ramankutty : And then—

Sheela : And then and then and then—

Ramankutty : And then and then—

Sheela : And then and then—

Ramankutty : And then and then and then—

Sheela : And then and then and then a little scooter.

[*Both laugh. Now they pretend to be riding a scooter. The scooter goes round and round and round. A thud against the door. The scooter stops. They get down from the scooter. Ramankutty goes to take a look at what has happened. Now he comes back.*]

Ramankutty : Somebody sticking up a wall poster.

Sheela : Which movie is it?

Ramankutty : Not a movie. Election.

Sheela : Asking for the vote on our door! Tear it up now itself. Later it'll be a problem, the gum will dry up.

Ramankutty : I'll tear it up at night.

Sheela : How can they do it on our door? Why are you so scared?

Ramankutty : They're politicians. Shouldn't rub them the wrong way. That's all. Not that I'm scared.

Sheela : And there's no forest out there to go and hide.

Ramankutty : Ah! We're indeed hiding in a forest. Well, get on to it!

Sheela : Where?

Ramankutty : On the scooter.

[*Loud laughter. A knock on the door. Both turn grave and look at each other. Ramankutty goes over to take a look and comes back.*]

Ramankutty : It's the wind.

[*Another knock. Sheela opens the door. Enter Chandrakumar. Dressed the way someone who has a job in Dubai does. A big foreign bag in his hands. Chandrakumar quickly walks up to Ramankutty, cries "Chetta, my brother!" and hugs him. Sheela stands at a distance. Ramankutty says "Ayyo!" and, wriggling out of the tight embrace, begins to speak in a faltering manner.*]

Ramankutty : You . . . you—?

Chandrakumar : Came by the morning flight. Chetta, my dear brother, do you know how difficult it was for me to find this house? Why do you live on this dirty street?

Ramankutty : To find a house . . . here—

Chandrakumar : [*Not paying attention to him*] When I enquired at the office, they said you don't have to be there, you're out in the field, and then I had to run up and down this whole town, calling out Ramankutty-chetta, Ramankutty-chetta! Enough to say I somehow managed to find this house! [*To Sheela*] You don't know me, do you? Ask him, he'll tell you. [*Pointing to Ramankutty*] Here stands my all! Would I have been able to go to Dubai but for him? Would I, brother? It's his help, and his help alone, that has made me what I am. The only thing is I don't have a real brother, a sibling. But how much better it is this way! You won't find a more loving person in this world.

[*He hugs Ramankutty again, and Ramankutty now begins to get disturbed.*]

Sheela : I'll get some tea.

[*Sheela prepares tea. At times her fingers get singed as she inadvertently touches the hot vessel.*]

Chandrakumar : Well, what news, brother? It's so many years since we saw each other! Remember the temple festival, on the ninth day, sssh! Let Chechi not hear this!

Sheela : [*Smiling*] I didn't hear anything!

Chandrakumar : Such times! Anyhow, that was our best time, wasn't it? Oh, I'm talking about myself. For you *this* may be your best time. With a woman like Chechi who is so full of grace!

Ramankutty : What do you do in Dubai?

Chandrakumar : A small business, Chetta. Selling automobile spare parts. An airconditioned home. Airconditioned car. [*Brief pause.*] Why, brother, why have you got so dried up?

[*Ramankutty laughs, as if to show he is perfectly all right.*]

Chandrakumar : Oh, I forgot! Chechi, please come here.

Sheela : In a minute. I'll bring some tea.

[*Chandrakumar opens the bag. Sheela looks on intently over the screen. Now she pours a few drops of tea into her palm and tastes it. She takes the tea to Chandrakumar who looks at her face intently as she hands over the tumbler. Sheela looks into the bag. Ramankutty watches Chandrakumar.*]

Chandrakumar : [*Sipping tea*] Anyhow, it's wonderful being back home! What's there in Persia? You turn your blood to water and make money. For what? Is money alone enough for man?

Sheela : When you have money you don't realise its value. Here, at times, the way we struggle even for a single rupee!

Ramankutty : Sheela, bring me a glass of water.

[*Sheela fetches the water. Ramankutty doesn't pay attention to her. Chandrakumar takes the glass of water from her and drinks it. Sheela keeps looking into the bag.*]

Chandrakumar : [*Picking up things from the bag*] A shirt for Chettan. [*Drops it on Ramankutty's lap.*] Pants for Chettan. [*Ramankutty picks up the shirt and pants: surprise and delight.*]

A saree for Chechi.

A blouse for Chechi.

Another saree for Chechi.

Another blouse for Chechi.

[*Sheela hugs the sarees, smells them, and is happy to see how pretty they are.*]

A bottle of Intimate.

[*Chandrakumar sprays the perfume on Ramankutty and Sheela. Sheela, bashful, moves away. Chandrakumar pursues her. He* *sprays the perfume on her body again, comes back and hands over the bottle to Ramankutty. Then he produces a packet of Triple Five cigarettes, tears it open, picks up a cigarette and thrusts it between his lips. Now he fishes out a lighter from his pocket and lights the cigarette.*]

Ramankutty : Sheela!

Sheela : Yes?

Ramankutty : A glass of water.

[*Sheela fetches a glass of water. Chandrakumar takes it from her and drinks it.*]

Chandrakumar : Chetta, have a cigarette.

Ramankutty : I prefer beedis.

Sheela : Oh, come on. Try it. Good stuff, isn't it?

[*Chandrakumar thrusts a cigarette between Ramankutty's lips and lights it. Ramankutty smokes.*]

Chandrakumar : Let me try a beedi.

Sheela : Oh no! It'll give you a bad mouth odour.

Chandrakumar : Never mind. Give it to me, Chetta. We should try out everything, shouldn't we?

[*Ramankutty gives him a beedi, and Chandrakumar smokes it with great relish. Ramankutty and Sheela watch him with a degree of surprise. After two drags Ramankutty throws away the beedi and lights another cigarette.*]

Chandrakumar : I want to take a bath. My whole body has sort of dried up.

Sheela : Let me see if our neighbours are using the bathroom.

[*She leaves. Chandrakumar gets to his feet slowly. Ramankutty too rises. They stand staring at each other.*]

Chandrakumar : Tell me the truth. Do you remember me?

Ramankutty : What do you mean? How can I not remember you?

Chandrakumar : Do you really remember me?

Ramankutty : Don't pull my leg, Chandrakumar.

Chandrakumar : Then, who am I?

[*Enter Sheela.*]

Sheela : The bathroom is free. I've kept the towel and the soap there.

Chandrakumar : Thank you.

[*Exit Chandrakumar. Sheela watches him move away. Ramankutty is all embarrassment and perplexity. Sheela now examines the things Chandrakumar has brought. She tries on a saree. Ramankutty checks out the shirt and pants. They switch* *on the tape recorder. Some kind of western music. They dance to its rhythm. At times Ramankutty looks around to see if Chandrakumar is back. Now the music stops. And they stop too, but only for a brief while. They resume singing and dancing.*]

Sheela : *Ayyappathinthakatthom.*

Ramankutty : *Swami thinthakatthom.*

Sheela : *Ayyappathinthaka swamithinthakam*
Ayyappathinthakatthom.
[*After a brief while, they stop dancing.*]
How is he related to you?

Ramankutty : Related? The relation . . . I don't know for sure.

Sheela : What do you mean? Have you gone crazy?

Ramankutty : He's my friend. Do you understand that?

Sheela : Yes, I do. He is a loving person. . . Shouldn't we buy some vegetables?

Ramankutty : Yes, we should. But we don't have any money.

Sheela : [*Taking out a currency note from Chandrakumar's purse*] Let's take this. He won't know.

Ramankutty : Oh, no. With no self-respect.

Sheela : Then buy the vegetables some other way.
[*Ramankutty is lost in thought.*]

Sheela : It's for his own sake, isn't it?

Ramankutty : Yes, but it'd be terrible if he came to know about it.

Sheela : Terrible, indeed! He won't know. Not if we take just one from a wad of currency notes.

Ramankutty : Even if he came to know he would probably not ask us about it, would he?
[*Ramankutty takes the note from her. Sheela picks up a shopping bag and gives it to him. Exit Ramankutty. Sheela stands looking intently at the sarees. Ramankutty returns.*]

Ramankutty : You aren't scared, are you, to be with him here?

Sheela : Oh, no. But do get back fast.
[*Exit Ramankutty. Now Sheela tries out a saree. She takes off the saree she wears and is about to put on the new one when Chandrakumar enters. He watches her. Now Sheela sees him and turns bashful. She offers him a comb and a mirror. He doesn't take it; instead he picks up a hairbrush from his bag.*]

Chandrakumar : Do you know who I am?
[*Sheela doesn't respond. Chandrakumar puts the hairbrush down*

and moves closer to her. He stands facing her.]
Heard my question?

Sheela : Yes.

Chandrakumar : Who am I? Tell me.

Sheela : Ramettan's . . . Ramettan's—

Chandrakumar : No. I'm not connected to him.

Sheela : Then?

Chandrakumar : Sheela, do you remember seeing me?

Sheela : No. How come? This is funny.

Chandrakumar : Where is Ramettan?

Sheela : He's gone to the market.

Chandrakumar : How far is the market?

Sheela : About a kilometre.

Chandrakumar : Did he go walking?

Sheela : [*Laughing*] How else? We don't have a scooter.

Chandrakumar : Sheela, do you know that I am here to see you? [*Sheela is shocked. But she composes herself.*]

Sheela : I understand that you like Ramettan and me a lot. [*Chandrakumar picks up his purse and inspects it.*] That's why you brought me these sarees.

Chandrakumar : Not just the sarees. The tape recorder, money, gold, everything is for you.

Sheela : For your Chechi, right?

Chandrakumar : No. For my love. [*He picks up the mirror and takes a look.*] Do you remember the path behind the college—the one that leads to the ladies' hostel?

Sheela : Yes.

Chandrakumar : I used to stand there, ogling at girls. But you are the only one who stuck in my mind.

Sheela : And you were—

Chandrakumar : I wasn't a college student. No money to go to college. [*He brushes his hair. Sheela folds the sarees.*] I stood there, by the wayside, for about two or three years, longing to speak to you. But the words were caught in my throat. Tomorrow, I'd tell myself, tomorrow I'll speak. And, in the night, I'd dream of our coming together.

Sheela : [*Laughing*] That was the time I was meeting Ramankutty.

Chandrakumar : I know.

Sheela : Till today our love hasn't diminished. [*Brief pause.*]

Chandrakumar : That's good. But, you've turned weak and tired.

Sheela : Call me Chechi.

Chandrakumar : No. You are the Sheela who, pursuing a dream, turned into the poverty of a life reduced to a dirty street. Is this the life you wanted?

Sheela : No one need interfere with our private life.

Chandrakumar : He ruined you. Like a plant withering under the sun.

Sheela : You're mad.

Chandrakumar : Yes. But does he see you and treat you except as a household object?

Sheela : How dare you come here and—?

Chandrakumar : You were glad that I came.

Sheela : Yes, but—

Chandrakumar : You took liberties with me. You picked up money from my purse.

Sheela : You'll get it back. Let Ramankutty come back.

Chandrakumar : But how? Did you ever enjoy a moment of fullness? Are you satisfied with this life? Is this what you wanted? Here, like a groan. . . .

Sheela : Who are you to put such questions to me? Getting in here and—

[*A knock on the door. Chandrakumar gestures for silence. Enter Ramankutty carrying some vegetables and a couple of paper packets, and with a bitter gourd under his armpit.*]

Ramankutty : Ho! The way prices soar!

Chandrakumar : Prices go real soaring out there in Dubai, Chetta! A ladies finger costs five rupees, and a kilo of rice is fifty rupees!

Ramankutty : And you get paid like that too.

[*Sheela picks up the things Ramankutty has brought and takes them to the kitchen.*]

Ramankutty : Give me some water, Sheela.

[*Chandrakumar produces a bottle of Scotch and shows it to Ramankutty.*]

Chandrakumar : And a couple of empty glasses, Chechi.

[*Sheela appears with two empty glasses and a glass of water, and looks on, amazed.*]

Ramankutty : I won't have it. I've stopped all such habits.

Chandrakumar : [*Opening the bottle*] If you don't want it, fine. I need some. Toiling all day long on the scorching earth—if something like this isn't there—look, it's good Scotch.

Ramankutty : Then I'll taste it a bit, Sheela.

[*Sheela keeps quiet.*]

Chandrakumar : Don't have it if you don't feel like it.

Ramankutty : It's okay. Just like that, you know. To celebrate your arrival. Not since our college days. . . .

[*Chandrakumar pours the whisky.*]

Chandrakumar : Cheers!

Ramankutty : Cheers!

[*They drink.*]

Chandrakumar : After lunch let's go for a movie.

Ramankutty : Okay.

[*They finish the first drink. Chandrakumar pours another. Ramankutty picks up his glass, moves to the other side of the screen and tries to persuade Sheela to have a drink. After refusing at first, she takes the whisky and gulps it down.*]

Ramankutty : She downed the whole thing! Will it be a problem?

Chandrakumar : No problem, Chetta. Have another drink.

[*They have another drink. It's then that Sheela, who has been preparing the vegetables, gets her finger cut.*]

Sheela : I cut my finger.

Chandrakumar : Don't worry. I'll take care of it.

[*He applies some whisky to the wound.*]

[Curtain]

Scene 2

[*Enter Ramankutty and Sheela in a state of wonder and amazement. It's a hotel or a club. The Waiters enter in the form of a Chorus and sing.*]

Waiter 1 : Particoloured flags, we,
Guarding the city limits,
Cacti watched over
By lovers forlorn.

Waiter 2 : Comes a magic night,
Screams the dark as a sea.

Waiter 3 : Waiters, we, turn on the lights,
Waiters, we, sing songs.

All : Particoloured flags, we,
Guarding the city limits,

Cacti watched over
By lovers forlorn.

Waiter 4 : On the glittering marble floor
A plastic god awakes and smiles.

Waiter 5 : On the synthetic wine cup
The city opens its lips.

Waiter 6 : And you too are here
To remove the bitter taste
Of some unknown curse,
To escape the shadow
Of some deadly sin.

Waiter 7 : Rolling on waves, gambling
On smiles, and branches sprouting
On hopping rhythms.

Waiter 8 : Petting panting rolling over
Swooning and soon fleeing
At some magic touch.

All : Particoloured flags, we,
Guarding the city limits,
Cacti watched over
By lovers forlorn.

Waiter 1 : People are coming in.
Waiter 2 : Let's switch on all the lights.
Waiter 3 : Let's switch on all the fans.
Waiter 4 : Let's switch on all the ovens.
Waiter 5 : Let's arrange tables and chairs.
Waiter 6 : Let's arrange the menu cards.
Waiter 7 : And carpets and napkins.
Waiter 8 : And table spreads.
Waiter 9 : And wash bowls.
Waiter 10 : And glasses.
Waiter 11 : And trays.
Waiter 12 : And ashtrays.
Waiter 13 : And dancers.
Waiter 14 : And prostitutes.
Waiter 15 : And gramophone discs.
Waiter 16 : Tokens.
Waiter 17 : Reservation slips.
Waiter 18 : Gambling rooms.
Waiter 19 : Musclemen.

Waiter 20 : Gunman.

Waiter 21 : Guitarist.

Waiter 22 : Flight schedule.

[The Waiters mime seeing the visitors come in and disperse in various directions as if to receive them. The Chief Waiter with a couple of helpers stay behind. And now they act as if they see two important visitors coming in.]

Chief Waiter : Come, O mighty and great, for you
This splendid house all decked up waits.
Come, O leaders of the masses, for you
This magic-carpeted fortress waits.
Come, O you rich and handsome, for you
This army of supple-bodied bearers waits.

Waiter 1 : O leading industrialists!

Waiter 2 : O mighty traders!

Waiter 3 : O city fathers!

Waiter 4 : O sons of the city!

Waiter 5 : O ministers, and sons of ministers!

[Two people are ushered in. They enter from the left and move right. The Waiters receive them with great reverence. The Waiters arrange six chairs—two each—and two tables; their movements are brisk and stylised.

Enter Ramankutty, Sheela and Chandrakumar. Sheela is all amazement at the dazzling atmosphere at the hotel. They get seated around a table, with Sheela in the middle and Ramankutty and Chandrakumar on either side.]

Sheela : Are there such places in this town? My God, what did we know of this place?

Chandrakumar : You've been living in this town for so long and you've never been at this club—it's such a shame!

Ramankutty : All this is meant for the rich, not for us.

Chandrakumar : Chettan is still his old self. Love around the temple tank, whispers on the darkish corridors!

Sheela : Life has to be lived this way. And not by the side of a street smelling of horse dung, with no space or money to move around—then why don't we live in the countryside?

[Ramankutty picks up an ashtray and examines it.]

Chandrakumar : Chetta, do you know why I'm not married yet? I don't have a car. I should buy one. An imported one. And I should buy a house. I need servants. Imagine the condition of a wife who has nothing to do except cook rice and curry! Terrible! [*Aloud*] Bearer!

[*Enter the Waiter.*]

Chandrakumar : What will you have?

Ramankutty : I need only a cup of tea.

Chandrakumar : Hey, aren't we here for dinner? [*To Sheela*] Do you like American Chops?

Sheela : Order whatever you like.

Chandrakumar : American chops, butter chicken, gimlet.

Ramankutty : What's gimlet? Is it like omelette?

[*The Waiter goes away. Chandrakumar laughs. Sheela looks at Ramankutty in scorn.*]

Chandrakumar : By the way, give me two minutes. There's a broker of imported cars here. I must speak to him. I'll be back soon.

Ramankutty : Okay.

[*Chandrakumar goes down the stairs. Music.*]

Sheela : When Chandran is around you don't notice the time passing.

Ramankutty : Once you'd said the same thing about me. Remember?

Sheela : There you go, again! You're so jealous!

Ramankutty : No, that's not it. Isn't he my best friend?

[*He takes her hands into his.*]

Sheela : Leave it. I know.

[*Ramankutty withdraws his hands. The Waiter brings three gimlets and places them on the table. "Snacks, sir?", he asks, and Ramankutty doesn't understand the question. The Waiter gives him a contemptuous look and leaves. Sheela sips the gimlet; she is angry. Enter two VIPs who get seated at a neighbouring table. Ramankutty sips the gimlet. Ramankutty and Sheela look at each other and, slowly, they smile. The band plays at a distance. Western music. Now Chandrakumar returns. The VIPs rise to their feet and stand on either side of him.*]

Chandrakumar : Hello!

VIP 1 : Hello!

Chandrakumar : Glad to see you!

VIP 2 : The prestige is ours.

VIP 1 : Where to?

Chandrakumar : I have a couple of people with me. An old friend.

VIP 2 : A friend.

VIP 1 : [*Nodding*] How are you related to him?

Chandrakumar : He's a friend.

VIP 2 : What kind of friend?

Chandrakumar : Meaning?

VIP 1 : Don't tell us a lie. We know certain things.

Chandrakumar : My friend Ramankutty and his wife.

VIP 2 : Is that his wife?

Chandrakumar : Yes.

VIP 1 : Not anyone connected to you?

Chandrakumar : No.

VIP 2 : You are a cheat.

VIP 1 : Why did you go to the park last week with that woman?

VIP 2 : You're trying to find a proper answer.

VIP 1 : Do you know me?

Chandrakumar : Yes.

VIP 1 : You're not Ramankutty's friend.

VIP 2 : You're not anybody's friend.

VIP 1 : Where have you hidden your black money?

Chandrakumar : I . . . I—

VIP 2 : You're a smuggler.

VIP 1 : You're an impersonator.

VIP 2 : A black marketeer.

VIP 1 : How many tape recorders did you bring?

VIP 2 : How many gold biscuits?

VIP 1 : You throw your money around and trap women. You can't get away.

VIP 2 : You're mean.

VIP 1 : Cruel.

VIP 2 : Swindler.

VIP 1 : Womaniser.

VIP 2 : Animal.

VIP 1 : The police are after you.

VIP 2 : You'll be imprisoned.

VIP 1 : Your black money will be confiscated.

Chandrakumar : Let me leave and take them with me.
[*The two VIPs take one step forward.*]

VIP 1 : They're not your people.

VIP 2 : We'll expose your secret relationship.

Chandrakumar : I'll leave. But they don't have any money with them.

VIPs 1 & 2 : We'll settle their bill.

Chandrakumar : Let me go.

VIP 1 : Bye!

VIP 2 : Bye!

[*Exit Chandrakumar. Music.*]

Sheela : Chetta!

Ramankutty : Mmm?

Sheela : Say something.

Ramankutty : Sheela!

Sheela : Mmm?

Ramankutty : Say something.

Waiter : We are the ones who only obey. We waiters don't think of what we shall have to obey next. We see everything. But don't ask us why we don't intervene. It's the owner and his sons and brothers who rule this hotel and the surroundings. We won't utter a word. We're only helpers and spectators. We're not even witnesses. Namaskaram!

[*VIPs 1 and 2 get seated again. The Waiter stands by. A whispered conversation. They ask for a couple of drinks. Sheela and Ramankutty are eating their dinner. The VIPs pass comments on Sheela.*]

Sheela : Chandrakumar is not back yet.

Ramankutty : I'll go take a look.

Sheela : Oh, no! How can I sit here alone?

[*They draw their chairs forward.*]

VIPs : Why be scared? We're here, aren't we?

[*The Waiter brings the drinks. They ask for a couple of drinks more.*]

VIP 1 : Small ones.

[*VIP 2 nods agreement.*]

Sheela : Chandrakumar is not to be seen.

Ramankutty : Let me go take a look.

Sheela : Oh, no, don't go!

[*The Waiter brings two drinks. The VIPs gesture to him to give them to Sheela and Ramankutty. Sheela and Ramankutty refuse the offer. The Waiter goes back to the VIPs and they send him back to Sheela and Ramankutty again. The Waiter moves toward them.*]

Waiter : It's a gift from those VIPs.

Sheela : Let them have it themselves. We don't want it.

Waiter : You know who they are? Haven't you seen their photographs in newspapers?

Ramankutty : Take it easy. Maybe this is just fun.

Sheela : Whatever it is, we don't want it here.

[The Waiter goes back to the VIPs, and VIP 1 takes a pencil and a piece of paper from him, writes a message and hands it over to the Waiter who brings it to Ramankutty. Reading the message, Ramankutty becomes uneasy. Now Sheela snatches the message from his hands, takes a look at it, crumples it and throws it away. The VIPs rise to their feet. VIP 1 moves toward Sheela, and VIP 2 toward Ramankutty. VIP 1 picks up the drink from the tray in the Waiter's hands.]

VIP 1 : The first time you feel a bit hesitant and unsure. Never mind. Nothing to be scared of here.

VIP 2 : Have a drink. Don't worry.

VIP 1 : [To Ramankutty] There is a solution for every problem.

VIP 2 : We don't go around talking about our dissatisfactions. But whose life is rid of such things?

VIP 1 : Desires may sprout and grow at unexpected moments.

VIP 2 : There is no danger in experiencing pleasure and having a good time.

VIP 1 : Good and bad are in our thoughts alone.

VIP 2 : Death is inevitable. Then why be so rigid?

VIP 1 : No kite flies above money.

VIP 2 : And yet, if necessary, you can pray too.

1 & 2 : And yet, if necessary, you can pray too.

VIP 2 : Drink!

[He hands the drink to Ramankutty. He takes it and flings the drink at the first VIP face. VIP's 1 and 2 shield their eyes with their hands. The Waiters come and drag Ramankutty away to the right. Sheela rises to her feet, and faints.]

V.I.P.'s 1 & 2 : Fall not, O sister, rash be not!
We're here to hold you, are we not?

[They help Sheela to her feet and lead her away. On the right, Ramankutty tries to get to his feet and falls. Tries again and falls.]

Announcement : Clean the floor!

[Enter a Waiter who begins to clear the table. Ramankutty complains to him. The words are unclear. As the Waiter is about to leave, Ramankutty, as if to face up to him, tries to struggle to his feet, and falls again. Now he rises somehow and shows the Waiter some kind of terrible scene. The Waiter finds nothing new in it. Ramankutty groans.]

Waiter : Groan, groan.

[*Ramankutty groans.*]

Waiter : Growl, growl like a tiger.

[*Ramankutty growls.*]

Waiter : Groan, groan.

[*Ramankutty groans.*]

Waiter : Grow like a tree.
Let all the forests be stirred.

[*Ramankutty is quiet.*]

Waiter : No, not alone, not alone.

[Curtain]

Scene 3

[*The scene takes place in a court room. The Judge is seated, and Ramankutty, bound, is on the left, his head bent low.*]

Judge : Let the trial resume.

Waiter 1 : This man, with the intention of murdering the minister's son, a great and noble person, threw a cup at him and assaulted him.

Judge : Did you intend to murder him?

Ramankutty : At that time, yes. But it was done, without thought, at the spur of the moment, because . . . because they—

Judge : Just answer the question. Nothing more.

Waiter 2 : This man brought in and displayed a strumpet at the club, thus marring the dignity and reputation of our age-old club. What is worthy of greater condemnation is the fact that this strumpet is his own wife.

Ramankutty : It's a lie.

[*Laughter.*]

Judge : Don't speak unless you're asked a question.

Waiter 3 : The crime against the State and society that has been charged against him is that, after proffering his own wife to a smuggler in order to earn his favour, he worked as his agent.

Waiter 4 : He attempted to murder our respected leaders who stood against this and tried to give him good advice.

[*Ramankutty grows weak and exhausted.*]

Ramankutty : Water, please.

Judge : Proceed.

Waiter 4 : This man, who allowed a notorious smuggler to live in his house for several days, has neither courage nor individuality. He is a coward who cannot resist the pressures of outward circumstances. As someone who has always wanted to reach the top echelons of society, he has only contempt for his profession and great disappointment over his own income.

Ramankutty : With the Court's mercy, some water, please.

Judge : Proceed.

Waiter 1 : Let it be stated that it is cowards like him, interested in nothing but the betterment of their own economic and class interests and prepared to sacrifice all moral principles for that purpose, who help perpetuate slavery.

Ramankutty : My throat's going dry.

Waiter 2 : This man is a spy who belongs to an alternate economic system and who factors in a conspiracy to finish off our top leaders.

[*The Waiter who turned up to clear the table in the previous scene comes in with a glass of water.*]

Judge : If anyone in this court requires water, the court itself will provide it. [*The Waiter leaves.*] All right. Now, if the accused wants to make a statement he can.

[*The court room turns into a bar, and the Judge a barman. The barman gives a drink to each Waiter. They leave with the drinks in their hands. Meanwhile, Ramankutty speaks.*]

Ramankutty : I did not commit any offence.

Judge : So you deny all the charges.

Ramankutty : That is to say, I . . . I—

Judge : You have already admitted several things.

Ramankutty : Me! It's just that they didn't kill me. I can't even stand up. I'm thirsty.

Judge : In a sense, justice is blind. It collects evidence even from the innermost intentions of human beings. The judge knows that everyone will resort to untruth and injustice in order to vindicate their own positions. The ways of justice will often be cruel and merciless. For it is the right hand of the powers-that-be. Yet, ultimately, its goal is to lead humankind to virtue and nobility.

Ramankutty : What you say is entirely false.

[For a while, the court rises and is ill at ease.]
I've told everyone about what I've done.
[The Judge is again a barman.]
I'll speak again. I, along with my wife and a friend—
[The barman hands over a drink to Ramankutty who takes it and drinks.]

Judge : You said that the court was entirely false. You defied the court.
[Enter the Waiters.]

Waiter 1 : When the black marketeer turned up, didn't you think that he would be of some use to you?

Ramankutty : Perhaps I did.

Waiter 1 : Didn't you give him undue liberties?

Ramankutty : Perhaps I did.

Waiter 1 : Didn't you feel that he and your wife were getting closer to each other?

Ramankutty : Perhaps I did, at times.

Waiter 1 : But you didn't talk about it to anyone.

Ramankutty : No. But I knew that it was all just a feeling.

Waiter 1 : Will you deny that the smuggler had an illicit relationship with your wife?

Ramankutty : I don't know.

Waiter 1 : Aren't you ashamed—about your own life?

Ramankutty : This is all a lie.

Waiter 1 : You tried to earn more profit through all possible means.

Waiter 2 : More demand.

Waiter 3 : Greater social status.

Waiter 1 : Had you done only this much, the present legal system would have pardoned you. For today our society has only sympathy for such people.

Waiter 2 : But you turned violent—against those who advised you, against our leaders.

Waiter 3 : No civilised society that recognises the justice system will tolerate it.

Waiter 1 : Your mind is dirty and distorted. Will you deny it?

Waiter 2 : Selfish. Deny it?

Waiter 3 : Greedy. Deny it?

Waiter 4 : For you nothing but your own interests. Deny it?

Waiter 5 : You want to kill people. Deny it?

Waiter 6 : You want to curse people. Deny it?
[*The Waiters perform a dance, chanting the following.*]
Truth Justice Equality
Love Society Law.

Ramankutty : I am a good man. Sheela is a poor woman.
Living in a small house—my eyes don't remain open—
I met Sheela at college—
She used to dance well—
I grew up in poverty in the countryside—
I've never hurt anyone—
Which song did she sing—?
What happened to my legs—?
There were flower pots in the college campus—
I never got any love from anyone—
My heart burns—
Gravelled pathways through the flower pots—
My head turns, I'm thirsty—
What did you give me to drink?
[*Exit the Judge.*]
I want to say something. Where is Sheela?
I have things to say.
I loved her—whom did I love?
I have to say certain things.
[*A masked woman enters, descending the stairs. The sound of anklets.*]

Ramankutty : Who are you?

Woman : Too late. The question has no relevance now.
[*The woman moves around Ramankutty with a kind of rhythmic footwork.*]

Ramankutty : Sheela? Or, is it a dream? Or what I've been looking for? [*The woman unties the knots and sets him free.*] I can move my hands now. No, they're turning cold and frigid. Touch them—or, say something—something—let me remember myself.

Woman : You were not what you thought of yourself. You have nothing to remember.

Ramankutty : I never betrayed anyone.

Woman : You have no accounts to give. You were a coward. A special kind—

Ramankutty : I loved Sheela.

Woman : Love is not ownership, nor possession, nor obligation. Is it?

Ramankutty : Who are you?

Woman : You never revealed what was on your mind. Hid everything—in words, in rituals, in flimsy consolations.

Ramankutty : I never hurt anyone. All I wanted was my own little world.

Woman : Love for you was a means of escape. A screen for hate.

Ramankutty : Sheela! . . . Sheela!

Woman : You knew that everything was a trap. You knew even that what you drank now was poison.

Ramankutty : You are the last witness. Say that I was a good man and that I loved. There is not even a window here to watch the sky. Say that the stars are rising.

[*The woman leaves, climbing the stairs. Ramankutty falls and dies. The Waiters, wearing masks, enter, move round him a couple of times and leave.*]

Announcement : Clean the floor.

[*The waiter who cleared the table previously, enters. He kneels down and touches Ramankutty on his shoulders.*]

Woman : This time too I stood watching. What I too have learned about justice is through screams.
I wished to speak to you about stars and flowers.
The next time I will.

[Curtain]

[This play was first produced in 1980.]

Translated from Malayalam by V.C. Harris

❑

Chokher Bali by Rabindranath Tagore, translated by Radha Chakravarty, Srishti, New Delhi, 2003, Pp. 424, Rs.295/-

Published in 1903, *Chokher Bali,* 'Eyesore', has been hailed as the first modern novel in Bengali. It had been serialized in the periodical *Bangadarshan.* But Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, coming before Tagore, is also regarded as the first great novelist in modern Bengali literature. There is, however, no gainsaying the fact that fiction and prose were the former's forte while Tagore was basically a poet. 'Aami kobi' I am a poet, was his significant refrain. There is, therefore, no reason to cavil — as some of his critics are fond of doing — about greatest novels not matching the excellence of his best poetry or the global fame of *War and Peace.* Moreover, it cannot be denied that his novels reveal flashes of his literary genius.

Though both the intellectual stalwarts had trend-setting achievements to their credit, what set them apart is Tagore's versatility. Besides, Tagore seemed more anxious to reflect, in the bewildering variety of his creative output, the social and humanistic concerns of his fraught times through the aesthetic prism of realism. Its story set somewhere around the second half of the nineteenth century, any talk about *Chokher Bali* as the first modern Bengali or Indian novel, however, would be inconsequential without considering why Tagore himself called it modern and what constitutes his concept of modernity.

True modernity, according to him, lies in looking at the world objectively, without any personal bias or prejudice and only such a vision is luminous and pure; modern is also eternal. *Chokher Bali* belongs to that category of literature, 'the literature of the new age', which seeks 'to reveal the secrets of the heart'. It boldly demonstrates, in the character of Binodini, the desires and aspirations of a full-blooded young widow stifled by social inhibitions while articulating the legitimate anguish of an unwitting victim of adverse circumstances and the rigours of the dowry system. There was nothing new in depicting an affair with a widow and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had already done it deftly at length.

But *Chokher Bali* blazed a trail by focusing on characterization and psychological impact of the evolving emotional interplays instead of relying merely on the routine complexity of plot and external circumstances as the mainstay of the story. The incidence and intensity of forbidden love burgeoning into an agonizing passion with tragic overtones needed to be conveyed in all its sensitivity and nuances in words that are not always found to be the convincing vehicles of communication. In his poetic idiom bland statements could have perhaps given way to diaphanous images and, at times, sense to subtle sensibility, which might not always be possible in the case of the relatively prosaic prose. But he accepted the challenge and his successful quest for a fulfilling self-expression saw its peak in his novel *Gora,* despite its polemical preoccupations.

How much more arduous would it then be to convey adequately the multi-layered and delicately structured aspects of the social and cultural life of a community not in its own tongue but in a totally different linguistic order of foreign origin? As Tagore himself once remarked, despite all that a translated version might claim to communicate, the vitamins are inevitably destroyed in the process. According to Dr. Johnson, however, "A translator is to be like his author. It is not his business to excel him." To this, George Steiner added, "Where he does so, the original is subtly injured. And the reader is robbed of a just view."

The German scholar Alexander von Humboldt opined that each language possesses an "inner linguistic shape" typical of the people who speak it. Alberto Manguel, the polyglot anthologist felt that translation, on the other hand, "proposes a sort of parallel universe, another space and time in which the text reveals other extraordinary possible meanings. For these meanings , however, there are no words, since they exist in the intuitive no man's land between the language of the original and the language of the translator."

Translators, no wonder sometimes come in for a lot of flak for various reasons arising out of different views and expectations rendering their task unenviable, to say the least. But the fact remains that the literary richness and cultural heritage of a community cannot be widely shared, across the otherwise impregnable linguistic barriers without recourse to translation. Quite understandably, therefore, 'Globalization of the Word' became the focal theme of the World Book Fair held in Delhi in 2002, in recognition of the crucial role of translation in promoting the mutual appreciation of ideas worldwide.

The translation under review has largely retained the verve and the grace of the original while delineating the intimate interrelations of characters in a Hindu household with its complex sense of middle class values and customs then prevalent in a society in transition. Besides, the text has a fair sprinkling of words like *thakurpo, alna, khanjani, kaki, didishashuri* and *bonjhi* which contribute to the local flavour. But many of such Bengali words have not been explained. A word like 'kaki' is, of course, commonly used in most parts of India; but such is not the case with several others. Moreover, as a world poet, Tagore's works command a global readership. It is not clear why many such words have not been explained to facilitate a wider understanding and appreciation as has been rightly done in the case of some others like *ghonto, punthis* and *padavali.*

The English rendering has been able to capture the mood of the moment in passages like this : "The nurturing feminine spirit in Binodini began to weep at the thought of Bihari's anguished face. Like the mother who paces up and down, rocking the sick child she holds close to her breast, Binodini began to dandle that anguished image in her heart. In her heart was born an impatient urge to see the image healed, to see that countenance enlivened again by the flow of life-blood and the blossoming of a smile." While she was drawn to the petulant Mahendra in fleeting flings of passion, largely prompted by jealousy for having lost the world which could be rightfully hers, for no fault of hers, her love for Bihari was enduring, growing gradually with empathy and understanding, as his liberal and selfless spirit stood out with the progress of events.

Besides Binodini the young and attractive widow, the pivot of the complex love quartet, there is Mahendra, the spoilt son of a doting mother, his childhood friend Bihari who is large-hearted and generous though somewhat self-righteous, Asha, of sweet and innocent disposition, married to Mahendra, Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's mother who is a rich widow and Annapurna, Rajlakshmi's widowed sister-in-law, pious and good-natured. Binodini was proposed for Mahendra by his mother but since he did not agree to marry her she was married off to a man who died soon leaving her a helpless widow, her deceased father having spent so much on her education that he could not leave behind a substantial dowry for a suitable groom. On the other hand, though Bihari was supposed to marry the orphan Ashalata, Mahendra persuaded him to give up his choice in Mahendra's favour. The self-centred Mahendra was thus in a way responsible for the ensuing doom in this ironic twist of destiny.

Endowed with the right credentials to bring alive, in translation, the fate of the characters caught in the tragic web, Radha Chakravarty, has described how Mahendra got himself into a fix, in a complex situation of his own making, in the following words: "Standing near the stairs for a while, Mahendra pulled himself together, trying to arouse his love for Binodini. He persuaded himself that tonight was a night of joy, for the object of his desire, for whose sake he had defied the whole world, was now his; tonight, there was no obstacle between them. But the absence of obstacles was the greatest obstacle of all: tonight, Mahendra was a hindrance to himself."

The book has been elegantly produced and printed with the words spaced out imaginatively to make for a comfortable reading. A few cases of slip-up in proof reading, however, cannot go unnoticed. On pages 183-184, for instance, words have been repeated while omitted or misspelt elsewhere. Brindaban has been described as a "Rural village—" in a footnote. A little care could have helped to avoid such unfortunate lapses in an otherwise splendid effort.

M.N. Chatterjee

Where Has My Gulla Gone?, by Padma Sachdev, Ocean Books Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2003, Pp.139, Rs.200/-

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Numerous authors have drawn their themes from the tragic consequences of India's Partition. Padma Sachdev touches the chord of essential humanism bringing home the sufferance of people which is perilously alike on both sides of the border. The eight absorbing stories in the collection under review provide a revealing portrait of the repercussions of wars and Partition as also the women's predicament in the male-dominated society. The author also writes on the obnoxious phenomenon of terrorism which has played havoc on the lives of innocent youths.

Padma Sachdev takes her readers virtually by the throat beginning with the title story, "Where Has My Gulla Gone?" wherein the shy and docile Ghulam Mohammed alias Gulla turns a fierce terrorist. The boy's eyes which once shed love and affection, now are full of terror and hatred. "I cannot believe that this Is my Gulla," says the narrator. "My Gulla balked at shedding the blood of a chicken, how can I believe then that my chicken-hearted Gulla would wield a wanton gun to kill men?" A curious irony is exhibited in the story, "The Divided Well." It ruthlessly satirises Partition which even divides a well shared by the people of the two nations. The comic overtone is further reinforced in the account of a tree with a similar fate about which the author adds: "Although the Ber tree under which Soma used to sit was on Indian soil, its branches leaned into Pakistan. "No less interestingly there were also 'two stones under this tree. One in India and one in Pakistan'. Inspite of all, the people of both the sides loved each other as typified by Soma and Razia.

Like Hindu-Muslim, the Hindu-Sikh fraternity is also one of the chief leit motifs of the author. Within this fold is the pensive woe of the women which the author brings out in striking focus. In “Goray Bhenji”, Mina becomes Amina during Partition and gives birth to two Muslim kids and when repatriated to Indian homeland, mothers three Hindu children. When the war breaks out, both her elder sons are pitted against each other to the agony of the mother. In “Caretaker”, the woman longing to have a home is almost reduced to a commodity for man's use just as in the story, “Convoy” which unlike the former, draws on a harsher issue. The author points all this matter-of-fact life in poignant detail. She grapples with the situation and leaves the answer to the reader who can concede no reversal to the truth of history.

The author writes on the milieu in which she has lived and observed from close quarters. Her characters come alive in the stories belonging mostly to rural and trading communities of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. She has quite a profusion of material at her disposal spinning her stories with a wide range and variety. Most stories are told in the first person. Perhaps the author dreaded it in “Convoy” and employed instead the third person mode.The use of flash-back in most stories, notably in “Goray Bhenji” and “Caretaker” brings relief to the narrative's monotony. Certain situations and the characters, though appear to be improbable, are fascinating in their own right. The authors nostalgic account of the pre-Partition days fires the readers' imagination with a vivid image of yesteryears:

> Those delightful days and pleasant nights of Lahore when Dwarka Prasad and Dhyan Kaur's husband Santokh Singh were Dwarka and Sukkhu to each other: They would fly kites, wrestle and play marbles digging a small hole in some lane or street and bathe in the river Ravi.... Pretty girls would throng the Kulfi shop in the bustling Anarkali complex...” (“Smoke”)

The stories have been translated by different translators who have done quite a laudable job rendering them into English and they are as readable as if they were original tales. It would have been in the fitness of things, if the book could devote two pages giving an appraisal about the translators. If topicality was not the consideration, the title of the anthology could as well have been “Goray Bhenji”. This moving story, translated by Shantiveer Kaul, stands out from the rest. The other translators are: Ira Pande, Payal Khemka, Saroj Vasishth, Susheela Aabika, Shivanath and Uma Vasudev.

Manohar Bandopadhyay

Trauma and Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India Eds. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta. Stree, Calcutta, 2003; Pp. 272; Hb; Rs. 500/-

1947. Independence. Yet the image always conjured up in one's mind is that of the mass exodus of people crossing both ways by any available mode of transport – on foot, bullock carts, over-crowded, bursting-at-the-seams trains and buses. The impact of the Partition of India was devastating. It happened in the west and the east of India and was accompanied by communal violence, arson, looting and rape. This was to carry on for months after the creation of Pakistan and India. For many years after Independence, the impact of this upheaval and violence on women and children went unrecorded, though within the affected families it was certainly discussed.

The pioneering work on Partition studies from a gender perspective was done by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, co-authors of *Borders and Boundaries*, and Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence*. Both these studies published in 1998, the fiftieth year of Independence, concentrated on the Partition of Punjab in western India, though in 1994, in the August issue of *Seminar*, Urvashi Butalia wrote, 'A serious gap is the omission of experiences in Bengal and East Pakistan (Bangladesh). But these require detailed attention of their own' (p.1). Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin too concluded in *Borders and Boundaries* that the Partition of eastern India deserved separate treatment. The editors of *Trauma and Triumph* aim to fill this 'serious gap' (p.1).

Partition in western India happened in 1947 and affected millions of people, but it was the only "partition" that this side of the country was to face.[1] Eastern India had a different history. The first Partition of eastern India in the twentieth century was the 1905 division of Bengal by Lord Curzon. The second one was the Partition caused by the enforcement of the Radcliffe line upon Independence in 1947. The third, though not a "partition" of India, was the creation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in December 1971 with the help of Indian military action, but its immediate impact was the increase in the refugees into India, a historical incident with immediate repercussions on the Indian states bordering Bangladesh. *Trauma and Triumph* concentrates on the "human dimension of the second Partition of Bengal" (p.1). In February 2002, *Seminar* published an in-depth discussion of the Eastern Partition of India. It was guest-edited by Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta. *Trauma and Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* includes many of the contributions made to the special *Seminar* issue. It is to be the first in a series of four volumes "which will concentrate on interviews and reminiscences, documentation and creative texts" (p.11).[2]

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[1] Bipan Chandra et al, *India after Independence*, Viking, New Delhi, 1999, p.80 The task of rehabilitating and resettling refugees from East Bengal was made more difficult by the fact that the exodus of Hindus from East Bengal continued for years. While nearly all the Hindus and Sikhs from West Pakistan had migrated in one go in 1947, a large number of Hindus in East Bengal had stayed on there in the initial years of 1947 and 1948. But as communal riots broke out periodically in East Bengal, there was a steady stream of refugees from there year after year till 1971.

The Interim Government was formed on 2 September 1946, with Jawaharlal Nehru as *de facto* head. The Muslim League was against it and launched the Direct Action Plan. Communal frenzy broke out in Calcutta on 16 August 1946 and spread to Rawalpindi, Noakhali and Bihar. Many lives were lost. In order to restore peace, Wavell quietly brought the League into the Interim Government on 26 October 1946; it was to remain there till 5 February 1947. On 20 February 1947, Attlee's Statement to the British Parliament declared that the date for British withdrawal from India was fixed as 30 June 1948, and the new Viceroy was to be Lord Mountbatten. Though there was anticipation of freedom, "partition of the country was implied in the proviso that if the Constituent Assembly was not fully representative (if the Muslim majority provinces did not join) power would be transferred to more than once central government".[3] Mountbatten's Plan of 3 June 1947 sought to effect an early transfer of power on the basis of Dominion Status to two successor states, India and Pakistan. His intention was to divide India but retain maximum unity.

The communal carnage continued well past Partition. Gandhiji spent four months in Noakhali and 15 August 1947 in Calcutta. The migration of refugees continued. On 8 April 1950, the prime ministers of India and Pakistan signed an agreement known as the Nehru-Liaqat Pact to resolve the issue of the protection of the minorities. The migration of Hindus from East Bengal however, continued despite the Pact.

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[2] *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Summary)* http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/rights/women/plat.htm
In the *fin de siecle* of the twentieth century, the Beijing Platform for Action, which contained a broad range of proposals for gender equality had been approved by the majority of the world's states. Sections 4 and 5 are about *Violence against Women* and *Women and Armed Conflict* respectively. *Violence against Women* states that in all societies, women are subject to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture, in both public and private life. They often face rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation in the workplace; and are particularly vulnerable to systematic violence during war. Sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, sterilization and forced abortion, prenatal sex selection and female infanticide are also acts of violence. *Women and Armed Conflict:* The Platform recognizes that rape, which is common during armed conflict, is a crime, and under certain circumstances is an act of genocide.

[3] Bipan Chandra et al *India's struggle for Independence* Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1988, rpt. 1991, p.495.

Trauma and Triumph is an excellent introduction to the impact of Partition of Eastern India especially with respect to its devastating repercussions on women. It is an anthology of interviews, reminiscences, documentation, plays, stories, poems, essays and a select bibliography and films on Partition. The brutality inflicted upon women during conflict is seen in Selina Hossain's *Kata Tare Prajapati / Butterfly on a barbed wire* based on the experiences of Ila Mitra who was imprisoned, tortured, and raped by the police. The interview with Bithi Chakravarty is a moving account of how the eldest child of a zamindar family of Mymensingh district (now in Bangladesh), only fourteen years old, had to bear the entire responsibility of her family: parents, three brothers and three sisters. Equally poignant are the interviews conducted with the widows of Vrindavan who are refugees from the east, but now living in 'Amar Bari' (My House), a shelter for the old and the helpless. Some of the contributions are translations, like 'Hoina', beautifully translated by Barnita Bagchi and Suhasini Das's diary entries of Partition, translated by Kumkum Chakravarti, are especially good.

This anthology also highlight how strife and the consequent upheaval has catastrophic consequences on women, especially since they become victims of communal and sexual crimes,[4] are separated and/or rejected from/by their families/community or have to readjust their way of life. Yet there were positive outcomes as well, if one is allowed to see it in that light. Women become, albeit out of necessity, financially independent, as many of these interviews, essays and stories show. Rachel Weber observes that Partition exposed women "to the world of men" which "brought them into contact with new ideas, with the business and political issues the men discussed. It brought about a politicisation and a growing awareness of the communal problems faced by the refugees living in the colonies."[5]

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[4] Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov *From Gender to Nation* A Longo Editore, Ravanna, 2002. rpt. Zubaan, New Delhi, 2004. p.12
Women's bodies mark the vulnerability of borders and, in another sense, women *embody* the borders: they are "the signifiers of ethnic or national difference" (Menon and Bhasin, 1998) Rapes in civil wars point to the same fact: according to the patriarchal consensus, the community's women should be defended as borders, or the other's women should be violated as the other's borders/territories. In a way, communal violence against women, seen as violence against the male other is part of the group-identity building. The production of nations/states produces borders and, then, naturally, their violations. Violence against women is a constitutive part of these processes. Its softest aspect is the subjugation of women to a men's (state, communal, social) hierarchy. Its extreme case is rape.

There are many disturbing and violent descriptions and accounts of the impact of Partition and the subsequent status of women refugees. But the anthology is also enlightening in its portrayal of how these women survivors of such a horrendous manmade catastrophe, were/or became very strong individuals once rehabilitated – whether as activists, teachers, mothers, housewives, sanyasins or in whichever career they opted for.

The only disconcerting fact is that the editors say in their Introduction, "Partition and exodus influenced the life patterns of both indigenous tribal women and Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims who crossed over or had to leave." (p.12) Most certainly the communities predominantly affected were Hindus and Muslims, as reiterated by Bipin Chandra, who says "the brutality of the Pakistan army was specially directed against the Hindus remaining in East Pakistan who were faced with virtual genocide." But he adds "a large number of Muslims, Christians and Buddhists, were forced to migrate to and seek shelter in West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya in India."[6]

Trauma and Triumph is definitely a good introduction to the partition of eastern India and complements well that of Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia, and lead on to further work towards a fuller picture of this neglected area.

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Jaya Bhattacharji

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[5] Rachel Weber *Re(Creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta*. p.59-79, p.71.

[6] Bipan Chandra et al *India after Independence*. p.239

Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-east, ed. by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih and Robin Singh Ngangom, NEHU, Shillong, 2003, Pp. 270, Rs.230/-

If poetry has anything to do with the seismography of the psychic turmoils of a region, here is an anthology to depend on. For an insight into the 'tears in the heart of things', the heart of affairs in the North-east — we could easily trust poets like Mamang Dai, Yumlum Tana (Arunachal Pradesh), Nilim Kumar and Nilmani Phookan (Assam), Anubhav Tulasi and Sameer Tanti (Assam again), R.K. Bhukoona and Ilakanta Yumnam (Manipur), Tarum Bhartiya and Emmanuel Narendra Zall (Meghalaya), H. Ramdintari and Mona Zote (Mizoram), T. Ao and Monalisa Chankiya (Nagaland), Kalabrata Chkraborti and Gambhini Sorakkhaiban (Tripura)— to name only a few!

A close reading of the best poems in the anthology does drive this point home to us that neither newspaper nor the emporia-approach to cultural studies leads us anywhere. Poetry is the most reliable of all guides who could lead us deep into the hinterlands and the inscapes of the lessor known regions.

The height of the politics of othering is the tendency to sweep off individual distinctions under a canopy term. Like a huge polybag from a General Merchants swing certain broad categories across our shoulders — categories like 'Madrasi', 'Bihari' and 'Chinky' — all South Indians neatly packed up in 'Madrasi' and all ill-clad easterns under 'Bihari' and all North-easterns thrown under 'Chinky'. Isn't it unfortunate that instead of people we evoke stereotypes? With all pride and prejudice we smudge individual distinctions and go on figuring the North-east as a great monolith! Here is one sensible attempt to evoke the unique poetic fervour of each of the Seven Sisters in an English with local flavour of each area. This task is tremendous and the failings understandable.

A translator's job is the tough job of dancing in chains, why talk of the double-bind alone? It's the multiple-bind of a 'Peer-Bawarchi — Bhisti -Khar' ! And doing justice to all the roles isn't that easy. Translation is a revelation, a friendship between poets but it is also an act of criticism. The translator begins with the advantage of selecting the poem that leads itself to its translation. This editorial choice is a formidable gain but too many manipulations can also result in a literary genocide.

A close reading of the anthology, the translator's anthology, also strengthens one's conviction that footnoting of culture or sprinkling of the original in translation is any day better than raising vague cultural parallels. One desi word or two in the English rendering could sparkle like a flower on the grass-bed. Pluralism (that our identity politics is struggling for) can be achieved only by retaining the flavour of the source languages in the target language (Raja Rao retained the flavour of Kannada in English, though his was not a case of attempted translation). How else would one be able to tell an Assamese poem in English from a Mizo one?

Poets in this anthology all draw from the same mythology, the same folk-motifs, the same moral geography where the same gods and ghosts, animals and birds, almost the same flora or fauna (even the tiniest insect) live together in a strange amity – under the same roof as if – fighting and cursing similar oppressions, angst and calamities.

Despite all caste, tribe and class-divides—supernatural, natural and human elements here emerge as one family, constantly operating under acute pressures of a lively love-hate relationship. And dressed up in the neatly ironed, missionary school English they even sound similar unless poets are lucky with translators like Pradip Acharya and Nirendranath Thakuria (Assamese) and Eastcrine Iralu (Nagaland) who retain the push and joy of the original and play out the softer nuances of the poem without damaging the gravitational force and the internal music of meaning:

> "How would you cross the hills, brother,
> the wind would crush you flat,
>
> the clouds would bury you
> the star will burn you dead.
> I will go as a song, sister
> through the stones
> making the leaves throb and trill!"

(Pradip Acharya's translation of Nilim Kumar's "Company")

Against the backdrop of the bore-breaking struggles of the subaltern the intimate glow of the typically Assamese form of address ('brother' and 'sister') exhilarates. This exhilaration and the music of the swirling lines delicately flow on to us even in English. This is heartening, but even able translators like Pradip don't care to retain words in original.

And some have even attempted a brick by brick rendering. It's good to be faithful but at times daring departures are more meaningful than blind faithfulness. Even when famous at home, the work comes into an alien city (almost like an orphan with no past to its readers in the target language) and it is through these daring retentions, editing and elaborations (compatible to the idiomatic vigour of the target language) that the translator artist makes dear Wittington's the "Lord Mayors of London"

This is the way the translator-artist emerges as the master potter. The potter transforms the spirit of an old pot, the recollecion of its shape into a new pot, and mastery lies in the manipulation of the text. Unfortunately, such creative manipulations are almost nil here in this anthology of many splendours.

Almost all the poems here are interlinear versions of the original structures have not been altered. For the fear of sounding odd perhaps, not a single word from the original has been retained. Thanks for the anthology, dear translators, but don't you think at times, lexical shocks renew-weary language bones?

Anamika

Sundardas by J.P. Das, translated from Oriya by Paul St-Pierre, K.K. Mohapatra and Leelawati Mohapatra; Published by National School of Drama in association with Har-Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2002. Pp. 102, Rs.195/-

Contemporary theatre workers are often heard bemoaning the paucity of good "scripts" for staging. In this imagined context, a large number of young directors end up getting a make-shift script ready to get the production started in time for an upcoming festival of some kind. Most of such productions today are the triumphs of the theatre-technician over the art of playwriting. However there is a grain of truth in this frequently heard complaint. Only a few good plays are getting written in most of the Indian languages. When they actually get written, they rarely find their way to other languages, let alone state and national capitals of theatre, mostly Government-funded or foreign-funded. The established modern Indian theatre is busy either manufacturing fast scripts for hurriedly organized work-shops and festivals whereas most young writers these days go after poetry (which they think takes very little time and just a bit of smartness to write) or fiction which has better pecuniary prospects as it lends itself to usages in the visual media. The literary genre of drama is a solely neglected field which neither the theatre-people nor the literary world or the publication industry is really bothered about.

In this context, J P Das's *Sundardas* is a significant addition to the neglected genre of Indian dramatic literature written in Oriya. It is the sixth play by J P Das who has several books of poems and works of fiction to his credit. Though this play assumes a lot of importance following the incidents of gory violence witnessed recently against Christians in Orissa, it was written long before these incidents—in 1993. The play also takes on a special meaning in the context of violent debates heard in different parts of the country for and against the politics of conversion.

Sundardas was a little-known social reformer of Orissa from the early 19th century. He is a historical figure who fought against the cant and convention of orthodox Hindu society. His simple philosophy was based on direct communion with God without the mediation of priestly or scriptural authority. Commitment to truth, equality of everyone regardless of caste and sex were some of his basic tenets. His active period as a socio-religious reformer synchronized with the advent of Christian missionaries in Orissa. His was the story of conflict on the one hand with traditional societies, both main-stream and tribal, steeped in superstitions and, on the other hand, with Christian missionaries whose manipulatory conversions he disapproved of. Apart from highlighting this conflict, the play also depicts the woes of common people in Orissa who jumped from the frying pan of casteist Hinduism and tribal society into the fire of proselytizing Christianity. Disappointed with both these conflicting historical forces, Sundardas withdrew into the inward-looking silence of his last days.

The play is an insightful treatment of the politics of conversion. It captures our interest for the simple reason that there have been few plays written on this subject in Indian drama. The playwright's sympathetic outlook enables him to understand the throes of a great sociological transformation in considerable depth. He views the transformation from an objective liberal-humanist position. Written in the style of a historical narrative, the play captures real-life people and situations. People are seen humanely and therefore no one is unduly vilified. The innate warmth and lovability of characters outshine their all too human shortcomings. A towering character like Sundardas has and admits to, his own share of human follies whereas a colonizing missionary like Bampton is also shown with some admirable qualities. The throes of the exploited masses and their uncertainties are depicted through characters like Balabhadra and Marua. Says Balabhadra: "What am I to do if people keep changing my name? How many names can I remember? In the village it was Balia. The Khonds called me Meria. Sundara Baba changed it to Balabhadra. And here I'm called David." In these words he is speaking for the wretched of the earth upon whom triumphant forces of history keep on imposing forced identities.

The play touches the painfully sensitive truth in the mouth of our national pride. Between the big lies promulgated by both upholders of tradition and reformation the lives and identities of small individuals are crushed and unsettled. The play exposes this harsh truth. Sundardas, the protagonist, refuses to enter into convenient pacts with either of the parties and retires into the historically insignificant zone of individual sincerity. The play also exposes the duplicity of Brahminical orthodoxy forcing people into traditional roles to promote its own hegemony and the heartless proselytization of Christian missionaries drunken with the idea of world conquest.

Thematically the play is a welcome departure from the beaten track of established Indian playwriting, both progressive and formalist. Stylistically, the play employs the technique of realistic narration. In other words, the novelty of the theme is not matched by the novelty of technique. The play is cast in the traditional mould of three-act structure. Such discrepancies are natural when the practices of playwrting and stage production are moving in two opposite directions. However, because the play uses a sprawling kind of narrative instead of a tightly-knit Karnadian (=Ibsenite) structure it can be adapted to the stage in more than one style.

The translation is eminently readable and smooth. Further, one of the translators Paul St.-Pierre has prefixed the play with a useful and informative Introduction. The author's note at the end of the text offers useful historical information necessary for the contextual understanding of the play.

The National School of Drama deserves our congratulations for collaborating in the publication of the play. Translations of drama have no takers today except a couple of committed publishing houses. Is it not therefore the duty of NSD to excavate similar plays and organize their publication instead of promoting the ineffectual classics of a highly selective pantheon of canonized modern Indian playwrights whose number has not registered any increase even after several decades?

H.S. Shiva Prakash

Time Out: Stories from Punjab, ed by Jasjit Mansingh, Srishti, 2002. Pp. 268. Rs 195

Divided into three indistinct segments, ostensibly to give the readers a sense of Punjab's history, these eighteen stories are plain arbitrary and not even subjective when considered in the context of an unoutlined criteria of selection. Another inadequately explained, logic defying act is the inclusion of Krishen Singh Dhody's "Hunger", the only already translated and published story. There is nothing exceptional about the story that could have warranted its inclusion. The explanation: "It came my way fortuitously and I could not ignore the circumstances which brought it to my notice" is again inadequate. The same can be said about Pakistani writer Tauquir Chugtai's "Who Did They Murder?" The reason: "I have to thank Amrita Pritam for bringing…to my notice" is an insufficient explanation. And though one can see the reason for its selection, the criteria or the justification is unwarranted and inadequate. In any case the opening acknowledgment "with deep gratitude the help rendered by Sardar Pritam Singh…in selecting them" renders redundant the very act of further elaboration. One can perfectly see the logic of including Chugtai's story but then there are and have been many more writers across the border who have competently deployed Hindu myths and rituals in their narratives. It is also unjustified because it comes at the expense of several distinguished writers from the time span covered whose exclusion did not even merit an editorial mention. The third flaw is the presence of Amrita Pritam, Ajeet Cour, Manmohan Bawa, and Kulwant Singh Virk twice over. The first three seemingly for their counseling, help and proximity. The repetition does not necessarily enhance their already established reputations in any way. On the other hand the inclusion of some of the relatively newer and promising writers, not to speak of the absence of some of the equally distinguished, would have helped the cause of the anthology better. Another advisor, Kartar Singh Duggal gets additional compensation, in terms of a second contribution, through a somewhat pontificating Foreword, hoping some of the names he has cited would "find a place in the second volume in this series."

There is no logical explanation for segregation of the eighteen stories into three parts, six, seven and five. Those in the first section stand out for the fairy tale treatment and narrative style, complete with morals at the end, except Kulwant Singh Virk's, which also is a somewhat simplistic war narrative about a soldier who did not come back. Since Manmohan Bawa's "Udambara" and "Kamal" are stylistically and thematically similar the inclusion of both is meaningless. Both deal with the plight of women left alone to fend for themselves by their husbands. Use of tense is often the problem with "Kanki" translation right from the first paragraph downwards. The sentence structure has literalness written all over it. Also, quick transition from the first to the third person mar's Ramindra Ajit Singh's rendition of maternal love.

A typical instance of literalness, or faithfulness to the original, that has often been the tragedy that has struck some of the finest pieces in the Indian languages, can be seen in Mohinder Singh Sarna's lucid tale "Maa", the avenging angel who valiantly reclaims her son back from the claws of death. "How did you have the heart to leave the boy at death's door and come back here." The same story has different spellings for different words. 'Mughal Chak' or 'Mugal Chak'? 'Tin of ghee' or can of ghee? Smaller vessel? 'Aalia' becomes 'Alia'. Buta Singh's "Sardarni" tells the valiant story of Tej Kaur who raises a lonely furrow against all odds.

Stories in the second section deal with the trauma of violence, both before and after partition and the havoc they cause to human consciousness. Both Baldev Singh's "Her Last Cries" and Jaswant Singh Virdi's "A Miracle" deal with the tragedy of women; one surviving by assuming a new identity while the other is a victim of mob frenzy. "A Miracle" is a touching narrative from a teenage boy's rather than the brutalized victim's point of view. Ajeet Cour excels in her understanding of the elements that have caused degeneration in modern day urban settings. 'November 1984' seeks to recreate the morbid events that followed the death of Indira Gandhi, the anti-Sikh riots that played havoc with the life of the innocents. Her narrative is always sharp, at times even brutal and she pulls back no strings to put across her point of view.

Prem Prakash's "He is not that Jasbir" carries forward the telling tales of the same carnage, and how they went on to create a temporary breach in Hindu-Sikh relations. He places his touching narrative centrestage when militants saw no reason. Though the presentation is different Raj Gill's "Splintered" again harps on the familiar theme of distrust based more on instinct rather than logic and truth, or the ultimate finality of human relations. Both these stories reiterate the absence of the resilience of human spirit in contemporary world. Ajeet Cour's second story "On Vacation" is all about games that destiny plays in the life of all mortals. Many of these, like unexpected encounters, that on the surface appear rather implausible, form the basis of numerous stories. It is when fiction confronts reality, or vice versa. It is one of Cour's more optimistic stories, though not without the underlying irony and sarcasm.

While both Amrita Pritam stories "Bhabi Morni" and "And the River Flowed on" deal with the core issue of man-woman relationship they differ in context and treatment. Both emphasise the need, desire and acceptance of the unconventional in matters of the heart. Her characters invariably seek freedom from bondage of any kind. The lyricism comes across, though not without philosophical undertones that has been the hallmark of prose in the later years. If Kartar Singh Duggal's "The Tantrik's Promise" seeks to make a comment on the naivety of the uneducated and rustic Indians and their overbearing suicidal fatalism, in his inimitable simplistic but long meandering style, Virk's short story "The Pond of Milk" has almost self-explanatory climatic lines: "Everybody is interested in unusual circumstances — like a crashed aircraft, or a truck turned turtle, or, in this case, split milk."

Even unintended humour seeps into the translated version.

Finally, to revert to the 'Editor's Note': "The arrangement of the stories will allow the reader to get a sense of the layers of time and events which went into the makeup of the modern Punjabi (whatever that is supposed to mean). Our roots are not easy to escape." There is no denying the concluding remark. What comes through in this anthology is the ethos of Punjabi culture in all its varied dimensions. And mind you, there aren't many. Most characters in these stories live and behave in the same manner, which is the essence of Punjab in whatever way one looks at it. Simple, straightforward, generous. If one was seeking stories that deal with contemporary situations, and show changing behaviour patterns, yet dealing with life in the raw, one has to look elsewhere. Honourable exceptions apart.

Suresh Kohli

Mahachaitra, the Great Spring and Other Plays by H.S. Shiva Prakash, Seagull, Kolkata, 2002, Rs.225/-

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Ironically the same 'multicultural' projects we critique are the only ones we ultimately look at as worthy of 'national' or 'international' recognition. We paradoxically look at them as the only genre that is not 'regional' and despite inherent problems we nevertheless regard them as 'national' or even 'transnational' in character. We have seen in numerous cases that these are the projects which are regarded as worthy of performance outside their local milieu and are duly 'packaged' and 'patented' as true festival material. These projects range from folk juxtaposing, to looking at marginalized, primitive, mythological narratives in their so-called authentic forms, to pretentious gender-specific cross-dressing preoccupations, to some abstract man-woman complexities. While we lament the plays that capture people's identity in its most contemporary 'modern' manifestation, we also tend to ignore them as regional and culture-specific. No doubt their success lies in being able to capture and express the socio-economic and even political problems of the real people. These are plays that create an impact among the audience, the people who really matters in theatre and do not require any 'exotic' appeal, special cultural funding or even a national or international festival circuit.

The collection of three plays *Mahachaitra, the Great Spring and Other Plays* by H.S.Shiva Prakash are renowned and popular in Karnataka theatre. Productions have become an integral aspect of the text today. The impact of the plays and their productions has made them a very significant part of the cultural history of contemporary Kannada theatre. Maybe for this very reason sometimes it becomes difficult to see it outside the perspective of Kannada theatre. In such a case, not being acquainted with the evolution of its production, while an obvious disadvantage, helps to look at it from the point of actual textual content. In this connection it undoubtedly transcends a "Kannada" identity to take on a spontaneous expression of what any progressive playwright in India looks for – an attempt to recreate popular, and if one dares to say so "a proletarian myth'.

The plays, *Mahachaitra, the Great Spring, Tipu Sultan* and *Madiah the Cobbler* as texts succeed in striking a dialectical balance between the individual and society, between the decay of the old in society and the rise of the new, between the complex and the simple, between poetry and dramatic prose, between the finiteness of each of the characters and the infinity of a re-created myth. It takes off from looking at socio-political issues of the people to go on to creating myths of revolution. The stories move in convulsions of violence, death and murders in every act, transcending thus the pettiness of life and reaching out to a new mythology creating the grounds from which myths eventually arise.

The first scene itself of *Mahachaitra* is a case in point. There is no need to tell a story; what the playwright has to do is reinterpret in a radical way a well-known 'saint story'. The playwright's methods are very well marked out. Shiva Prakash again and again uses the technique of play within a play, a device that directors love to work with, but in this context it reiterates his objective of retelling, engaging in the process of a dialectical communication. He plays around dramatically with the established power structures as reflected in the traditional myth and subverts them to create a universal, contemporary, thematic structure.

In *Mahachaitra*, the central theme is the 'Pratiloma' marriage between a cobbler's son and a Brahmin's daughter — an incident that creates an unprecedented caste tension. This leads to the resignation of the progressive, even revolutionary Basavanna who inflicts upon himself a self-imposed exile. The ensuing civil wars take on the dimensions of a class struggle. Shiva Prakash takes away the focus from the marriage and goes on to highlight the grievances, the misery and anxieties of the common people. The marriage is re-enacted much later (scene iv) through children at a make-believe play. The children are depersonalized, representing merely their caste identities. The plot centers around the story of the lower castes who carry on their struggle, now without their leader. Without Basavanna as the king's advisor, the oppressive system comes back in full force closing around in the most oppressive manner. The muths, the nobility, religious institutions— all are now jubilant and determined to consolidate their power, which hitherto had been slowly eroding. A repentant king in trying to make up has no qualms about trading off his people to win their support. Basavanna's presence though felt in every scene, never appears in the form of a person but is discussed ruthlessly and openly by his followers and detractors: a leader with vision, far ahead of his time but who deserts his people at the time of their greatest need.

What does Basavanna do in his exile to make him embrace a violent death? What do his followers Machideva and Hadapada Appana do so that the king's drummer announces that they are "indulging in traitorous activities" which translates into rioting, attacking temples and muths, looting granaries etc.?. All the strategies of guerilla warfare are worked out: street conflicts take on the shape of children of the potters showering the soldiers with stones while the women hurl abuses. As oppression builds up, so does resistance; the distant rumbling of a revolutionary storm can be heard. In the most poetic way, comes a second Basavanna, once again enacted, who pleads with Basavanna not to desert, not to give up "If you do not hunt, you will be hunted down". A message which led to the now well-known controversy that rocked Karnataka, echoes of which reverberated throughout India. It was a moment for all theatre people in the country to be proud of—a play which once again brings out the Leftists and the Dalits out in the streets to fight fundamentalist forces.

The second play *Madiah the Cobbler* is almost a sequel to *Mahachaitra* – Basavanna's story culminates, as a sub-plot. Basavanna now incarnated in stone and worshipped, waits to be liberated to finish his unfinished work. The human shoes, which Madiah needs to save mankind from the autocratic and fascist King Sravana, is made under Basavanna's directions by his devout follower Halliah. Basavanna directs Madiah to his house. The shoes are the only means to free Mother Earth from the tyrant whose feet trample her right to existence and dignity. Along with Basavanna, the act would free the captive daughter of the forest deity Sankava. Sankava comes in, bound in barbed wires and accused of being barren. Liberation from tyranny would endow her with twins.

The freedom of the people, the downtrodden needs to be complete, Basavanna's work needs to be taken to its final climax. The journey now has been taken over not by a larger than life hero or a godlike saint, but a comic, witty, commoner. The mythical aura built up, the hero's story proceeding to its logical end is now taken over by a non-hero, a comic hero in a subversive reinterpretation of the entire mythical genre. The myth, which Shiva Prakash builds up through his saint story, is now deliberately and systematically pulled down. The mythical archetypes have come full circle through the comic, the subversive the burlesque.

Madiah is a universal character popular in all dramatic repertoires who fights against dictatorship and fascism. His shoes are worn by the mighty King Sravana on the very day he is to announce his victory over all heaven and earth, the day he would ultimately shear Mother Earth of all her dignity by forcing her to marry him, ending up in the worst possible act of incest. She is crying in her helplessness; neither the sun, the moon or the gods can come to her rescue; they are all slaves of the mighty Sravana. The nemesis comes through the shoes of Madiah; it burns and clings to Sravana's feet and sets his body aflame foot upwards.

The third play in the collection can only go from here, beyond the mythological genre to the historical and creates the delicate dramatic balance, which reconstructs a historical myth. The harsh, ugly world of the tyrant, the repressive world, which has been created, allows Tipu Sultan to emerge as the revolutionary nationalist. His world has been created around him before his tale can be told. He is no abstraction, no symbolic character; he is an intensely alive human being, a true fighter who now takes up arms and fights to death the menace of British imperialism and colonial oppression. There is no traces of a regional identity but a nationalist identity; a rediscovery of history, which has long been distorted and raped beyond recognition. It reaffirms the violent revolutionary history of India, the martial traditions of its people, and recounts again and again the heroic tales of armed rebels and martyrs.

The play starts with a touching scene where a young boy, devastated by the loss of his brother in battle is ready to die. The wounded soldiers, unable to fight anymore tell him " Hold it. Why do you want to die for nothing? If you want to die, die fighting the firangis." The cries of the British wounded soldier rent the air along with Tipu's soldiers. The queen and the queen mother come to tend to them when the imperialists' bullets hit Tipu's beloved queen. Tipu's appearance in the opening scene where he looks at mass destruction with quiet determination and dignity sets the pace of the play, which henceforth follows history episode by episode. History here is drama enough, it is a story of British treachery, betrayal. Amidst ruthless military attacks, Tipu valiantly tries to save his country and rebuild his kingdom. His defeat or shahdat is inevitable and history is pre-determined but as the play rolls on it is a tale of suspense, drama and revolution. The play weaves in the story of the great French Revolution adding another dimension to Tipu's fascination for freedom and liberty. "The French Revolution is now shaking the roots of all kingdoms of Europe. As soon as the news of the revolution reached us we too had it promulgated through the streets of Srirangapattana: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death."

Shiva Prakash has lost all traces of a specific regional identity; it is a story of common progressive identities, a story of the Indian masses. In translation, maybe not in production, the texts make socially, politically aware theatre of the most forward thinking and progressive kind in the present times. Its potential for performance remains unexplored outside Karnatka and Kannada theatre, which is unfortunate; but that gives no critic or scholar a right to deprive it of its rightful place in the context of pan-Indian theatre.

Bishnupriya Dutt

Illiterate Heart by Meena Alexander, TriQuarterly Books, Illinois, U.S.A., 2002, $14.94

As early as in 1982 while Meena Alexander was honing her art, when she was asked if she was too close to her art, she said in an interview to *Chandrabhaga* (Number7, Summer 1982, P. 70, Cuttack, India): "I am criticized a lot, by fellow poets, Men, who say that I'm close to my own poetry... I would be blind unless I wrote, much as a cart-horse, eyes covered with bits of old leather, dying a living death. Perhaps I am too close, but the distancing can only come later...from within my own task of building... whatever the aesthetic consequences. And it is only a few years that I've been seriously writing. There's a long way to go." Indeed, she has come a long way. Her latest collection, *Illiterate Heart,* is a further ascendance. What she said of her art and what she was charged with are both applicable to the art of her poetry today, after two decades. She remains "close" to her poetry; of necessity, she has garnered strength out of this inherent weakness of hers. She cannot view things from a distance, poke things with the end of a stick. She goes near it, enters the spirit of it, to feel its pulse in her veins.

In *Illiterate Heart,* what Meena Alexander says of her character's journey in her poem "Man in a Red Shirt" is only applicable to herself: "This journey is a narrative of loss." Her poetry records what has been lost, apart from the process of growing up, in her journey from the place of her birth, India, to the place of her work: the U.S. So, in turn, in most of her poems, Alexander tries to recapture and preserve what is being irretrievably lost to her: family lore, cultural moorings and a live past. Since this act of regaining a personal history is no more possible, she falls back on the act of dreaming: "History comes/ without cost, in dreams alone." Her life now belongs to those millions of "translated lives." With her soul-brother, Aurther Rimbaud, she cries, *"Quick! Are there other lives?"* An agony, a revelling in the ecstasy of that agony, the agony to live a life in a multicultural society, that cannot be entirely her, and her alone.

But which creative persons are, or were, there who would not have, as Meena Alexander asserts, "translated lives?" Allen Ginsberg is one, the staunchest devotee of Krishna, Mira is yet another figure who belong to this category of "translated lives." But how does the poet deal with their lives? "Indian April" with its dramatic beginning in the lines—"Allen Ginsberg on a spring day stopped/ naked in a doorway in Rajasthan"—creates a cameo of Ginsberg's intense moments of hallucination/ enlightenment in India, and Alexander provides a prop to him in the figure of Mira. Alexander's way with her characterization is that she joins the table with her characters for an informal or a solemn conversation, or brings together characters as disparate and different in time and space as her mother and Agamemnon, or, as in this poem, Ginsberg and Mira to a common platform. The poet herself throws light on her craft when she says in her 'Note' to her earlier collection *House of a Thousand Doors* (Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C., 1988) that "In the poems and prose pieces about my grandmother there are two grandmothers... They grew up within a few miles of each other. In a dream poem like "House of a Thousand Doors" the two figures dissolve into one. Now in the poem "Indian April" in *Illiterate Heart* we have Ginsberg "watch(ing) Mira approach." Of Ginsberg says Alexander, "Tired out with your journals you watch/Mira couch by the rough stones of the alley./Her feet are bare, they hurt her." Such tender words, such fellow-feeling. Both of them, Alexander and Mira, women travellers. As Ginsberg's journey to India was a quest for the spiritual uplift, it is befitting that Alexander brings in the passionate devotee of Lord Krishna, Mira, as the best model and co-traveller for Ginsberg and for herself too; all of them being characters in "a narrative of loss." The poem ends with Ginsberg plunging headlong into the deeper waters of Krishna-consciousness:

> Allen Ginsberg your face is indigo,
> The colour of Krishna's face, Mira's bitter grace.
> Into the hard water you leap, drawing me on.
> I hear you call: *Govinda, aaou, aaou!*

So, Alexander distinguishes herself by the company she keeps. So what, she would argue, even if it happens in dream-sequences. And it is in dream-sequences that the poet situates herself, as a small child, in the days of the non-violent movement of National Freedom of Mahatma Gandhi: "Down the stone steps// strides Gandhiji.../ he calls to the girl/ here, come/ make salt with me!" This could have turned out to be a fanciful historical association had she not personalized it by her act of sidling, as a child would do, to her grandfather: "she knows/ he is her grandfather, /she lifts up her petticoat, / she skips to him."

This return to her nation's history paves the way for her personal past. And she is at her best intimate self when she is dealing with her family members, and this aspect of her writing accentuates her "narrative of loss". She would now speak of her father ("Elegy for my Father"), now of her mother ("An Honest Sentence"). These are the measures of making up her "loss" yet they are not just plain "narratives." From across the oceans, she cries passionately to her mother in India: "Amma, come, quick." Dealing with the filial relationship in "An Honest Sentence" she once again brings in a literary figure: "I cannot see my mother,/ yet I see Agamemnon striding up the hill," and then she wonders why should she yoke them together: "How can I bring the Greeks and Indians together like this?" Agamemnon's rage is hers also:

> A child's upright hand—
> Stony syntax, slow work
>
> In part-time English
> Trying to forge an honest sentence
>
> Such as
> *Someone has cut her cords.*
>
> *Or: someone will swim farther*
> *And farther from what she feels is the shore.*

One can find the kind of this love, this rage, yearning, assurance in such poems as "Port Sudan" and "Elegy for my Father." She travelled the world with her father: Karachi, Sudan, England. Her past is present in her ("memory believes") and in her poetry, in the poem "Daffodil," which is one of the most beautiful poems in *Illiterate Heart,* Alexander writes in "Notes" to the book, "This poem was inspired by Kasua Eiichi's poem "Daffodils," but also running through my head was that other poem, William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," which I read as a child in India without ever having glimpsed these yellow-gold trumpets."

The poet plays her characters well. In the first poem "She Hears A Gold Flute," "A woman might stoop to enter, / gazing at walls." But the same woman is not a carving on a "Mohenjo Daro" pot, but is the poet's own creation of her liking, a reflection of reality. Even that woman could be the poet herself, stooping to peep into the darkness of her heart, into Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness.* A cherished inheritance for us to explore in our own ways. And this is Meena Alexander's:

> why should they imagine no one else
> has such rivers in their lives?
>
> I was Marlowe and Kurtz and still more
> a black woman just visible at the shore.

Momentous. "Borges and I:" Alexander and I. Meena Alexander is dictated by heart and yet she is conscious of it: "What consciousness takes/ will not survive itself." In "Rites of Sense" of all that she has been taught, she says, she learned to "Stitch (her) woman's breath/into the mute amazement of sentences." Meena Alexander the poet weaves Meena Alexander the daughter into the poem: "Amma, I am dreaming myself into your body." Or that 'I', though not neurotic 'I' of Sylvia Plath in relation to her 'daddy', bones up to her father in "Elegy For my Father," "you were the age I am now, / a man for all climates." "Notes" to "Elegy For my Father" reads "As I finish this poem, a warm rain falls. There is lightning in the air. The making of a storm. My father loved storms. He called them 'nature's glory.' I began this poem in New York City, and now exactly a year after his death I am in Pandan Valley, Singapore." So, she is now a woman "for all climates," as she said of her father, carrying the warm of the rain. That self could be prompted by the thoughts of Rumi, a bold, sensuous and sensual self. "In Cincinnati" "My strange familiar stands erect./ His hair is filled with sparks from the wheat fields/of Cincinnati where he was born." And then there is the rigid yet not rebuffing self in "Daffodils:" "Come, I will not flash Daffodil flesh at you. I am older, /I have two children now, / my breasts are jugs of blood / my hair black with silver/running through..." When this adapted self situates herself in the East, in the place of her origin, playing sister to her sister, replaying the childhood years, she is delirious of history. This alone can produce a sense of wonder:

> I could not sleep that night
> musing on what you had called
> the delirium of history.
> Were you quoting someone?
> What on earth did you mean?
> But even while listening to you
> I was trying to figure out what the moths were doing.
> ("Mirror of Earth")

From the grandiose ("history") to the humdrum ("moth"), but all through that sense of wonder persists. This sense of wonder is a major artery of the heart of her poetry. She is on her toes to respond to the call of mystery, when it comes. And what she speaks of her character is true to herself:

> How sharp the reeds at the river's brink.
> *I am lonely she writes, like a reed, root-cut.*
> *If the river called, she'd go, I think.*
> ("Roadside Music")

Ultimately, the dichotomy between the poet Meena Alexander and her persona 'I' dissolves: "Are these her lips or mine?/Whose tongue is this/ melting to the quick of migrancy." That vexatious word 'migrancy' is bound to raise its head when a poet puts her feet on both the hemispheres of the world. Like A.K. Ramanujan; like, after him, Sujata Bhatt, Agha Shahid Ali; Meena Alexander. There is behind them the trail of their country wherever they go. One might take the help of such tools such as migrancy, Diaspora, hybridity to illustrate their amazing feat, but when it comes to the poet herself to express her experience those words which occur to her, which recur in her poetry, are like 'father,' 'indigo' ("a vat of indigo," "the map of indigo," "a horizon scrawled in indigo," "a leaping indigo wave," "the indigo sea," so many) and "heart."

It is the "heart," that "animal heart// that means to keep peace/ with the terrible light of God," which forms the pivot of Meena Alexander's poetry.That heart is illiterate. No amount of education can make a heart literate. No parrot-teaching. The poet knows this. So the question "Can you whistle hot tunes/to educate the barbarians?" In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Faber and Faber, 1987, P.250) Milan Kundera has said, "When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object." Though nowhere in her book Alexander says vociferously of the heart as Kundera does, yet it is the leit-motif of *Illiterate Heart.* Alexander's heart is incorrigibly romantic.

The winning example is the title poem itself. "Illiterate Heart" besides being a tribute to memory, a testimony of her kiln, is also a learned poem drawing upon many sources that calls for the two-page "Notes" to the book. She goes back to the days of her learning the alphabet: *"aa ee oo uu a (apple) b (bat) c (cat) d (dat) / Dat?* I could not get, so keen the rhymes made me,/ sense overthrown." Here what is in play is obviously the heart, which listens to the rhyme and is carried on by it, not the mind that would have reasoned and cancelled what is incorrect. So what one is expected to do is to cock up one's ears to the poet's heart: "What beats in my heart?" But the succeeding question "Who can tell?" bounces because it is an echo of the former one. This failure has its repercussion. The poet admits "I cannot tease my writing hand around / that burnt hole of sense." That was in the early stage of "a child babbling". From that stage to the stage of "grown women combing black hair" is an arduous passage. After that she "recognizes" herself: "Someone I learn to recognize / cries out at Kurtz" but the end result?

> The heart is illiterate
> the map is torn.

But everything is not over, yet. She does not give up when "in Pokhran's desert/ a bright bomb/ caves soil/into feverish rums." She looks inward and finds there is "heart's hope." All through the *Illiterate Heart* there is this glowing hope. Thus, *Illiterate Heart,* Meena Alexander's "the movement toward self definition" has turned out to be an unembellished book of poems where there is no sleight of words. The feeling here is pure, direct. And the poems intimate.

Rabindra K Swain

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Gehani, Mohan Issardas (b.1938) Sindhi poet, short-story writer, critic and translator; has published two collections of poems, one collection of essays, one work of historical research and four one-act plays; recipient of The NCPSL's Prize. Add: 2A/ 3 Ratan Nagar, Opp: 4 Bunglow Road, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 058.

Ghosh, Arunabha (b.1958) Translates from Bengali to English; associated with the Calcutta High Court as a translator. Add: Flat C-2, P-40, Garia Park, Kolkata 700 084.

Ghosh, Sudeep. Young Hindi poet from Birati, West Bengal; presently a research scholar in the Department of Hindi, University of Allahabad, U.P.

Harris, V.C.: Critic, translator and expert in media studies; presently Reader in English in the School of Letters, M.G. University, Kottayam 686 562, Kerala.

Jancy James: Critic; Professor of English in University of Kerala and Director, Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Kerala; translates from Malayalam to English; specialist in women's studies. Add: "Jimanis", S.P. N273, Sreekaryayam P.O., Trivandrum 695 017

Jayaprada, C.L.L. (b.1954) Critic and translator; has several published works to her credit; presently working as Associate Professor of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam 530 003.

Jha, Krishna. Social activist, documentary film-maker and poet; presently Director of Research Cell of Achutha Menon Foundation. Add: 408, Link Apartments, 18, I.P. Extension, Delhi 110 092.

Jotwani, Motilal (b.1936) Sindhi poet and fiction writer; also writes in Hindi and English; has more than 50 published works to his credit; recipient of Hindi Academy Award, U.P. Hindi Sahitya Sansthan Award etc. Add: B-14, Dayanand Colony, Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi 110 024.

Khaund, Malaya (b.1945) Critic and editor; translates from Gujarati and

Oriya into Assamese; has several edited and translated works to her credit. Add: U-18/4 DLF City, Phase III, Gurgaon 122 002.

Kohli, Suresh (b.1947) Poet, literary critic and documentary film-maker. Has published four collections of poetry, one novel and edited several volumes of essays and short stories. Has translated extensively from Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi. Edited and published *The Indian Literary Review* from 1979 to 1990. Add: E-180, Greater Kailash Part II, New Delhi 110 048.

Kumar, Ila (b.1956) Hindi poet; has two collections of poetry, *Zid Machhli* Ki and *Kinhi Ratriyon Mein* and one work of translation of Rilke's poems. Add: 102, Sri Ganesh Enclave, Gayatri Nagar Road, Nagpur 440 022

Kolakaluri Enoch (1939) Well-known Telugu novelist, short-story writer, playwright and poet; former Vice-Chancellor, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati 517 502. Add:191, Santinagar (Telugu University) 4th Road, Anantapur-515004, Andhra Pradesh

Mathur, M.M. Writes short-stories and articles in English; former member of the Central Administrative Tribunal. Add: A-22, Silver Oak Aprtments, 109 Indraprastha Extension, Delhi 110 092.

Mehndirutta, Virendra (b.1930) Hindi fiction-writer and critic; has published seven books of short stories and two volumes of literary criticism; retired as Head of the Hindi Department, Punjabi University; former Chairman, Chandigarh Sahtiya Akademi; recipient of Sahitya Shiromani of Punjab Government and Goodwill Award by Uttar Pradesh Government. Add: 696 Sector – II, B, Chandigarh 160 011.

Mehta, Tania. Indian English poet and critic; teaches at the Department of English, Punjabi University, Chandigarh. Add: C/o Ishan Mehta, C-726, New Friends Colony, New Delhi.

Mishra, Akhilesh (b.1966): Indian English poet; diplomat by profession. Add: Deputy Consul General, Consulate General of India, 540 Arguello Blvd, San Francisco, CA 94118, USA.

Mohi, Vasdev (b.1944) Sindhi poet; writes also in English, Hindi and Gujarati; has published five collections of poetry, *Kalpana Kitab Ghar*, *Chubinb Mein Kakhu* etc.; recipient of Kavi Bewas Award by Sindhi Sahitya Akademi. Add: A/355, Nayan Nagar, Sahijpur Bogha, Ahmedabad 382 345.

Murali, B. Well-known young Malayalam fiction-writer; winner of Sanskriti Samman and other awards. Add: Sr. Sub Editor, *Malayala Manorama,* Thampanoor, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

Nadig, Sumatheendra (b.1935) Kannada poet, short-story writer and critic; also writes for children; has several published works to his credit; former Chairman of the National Book Trust, India; recipient of Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award. Add: 38, 1st Main, 3rd Phase, 6th Block, Banashankari 3rd Stage, Banglaore 560 085

Narendra, Prasad R. (b.1946-d.2003) Malayalam critic, playwright, theatre director, critic and film and television actor; former Professor & Director School of Letters, M.G. University, Kottayam; directed twelve plays, mostly written by himself; *Sauparnika* won him the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best playwright, 1985; also recipient of Kerala Sangeet Nataka Akademi Award on several occasions for direction. Address of legal heir: Nanda Narendra Prasad, Sasthankulangara, Mullikkulangara, Mavelikkara, Kerala.

Narasimhan, Raji (b.1930) Indian English fiction writer and critic. Has six published works to her credit including, *The Sky Changes* (novel), *The Marriage of Bela and Other Stories* etc. Add: B-107, Gulmohar Park, New Delhi 110 049.

Palit, Dibyendu (b.1939) Bengali novelist, short-story writer, poet, journalist, and film and drama critic.; his published works include 42 novels, 25 collections of short stories, 9 collections of poems and 4 volumes of essays; recipient of Ananda Puraskar, Ramkumar Bhuwalka Award, Bankim Chandra Memorial Award and Sahitya Akademi Award. Add: Flat 7F-2, Meghamallar, 18/3 Gariahat Road, Kolkata 700 019.

Rahi, Ved (b.1933) Well-known Dogri short-story writer, poet, novelist, film director and script-writer; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award and Gaurav Award from Maharashtra Government. Add: B 235, Sarvottam Housing Society, Irla Bridge, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 008.

Ramakrishnan, E.V. (b.1950) Poet and critic in English and Malayalam; has three poetry collections and several collections of critical essays to his credit. Add: D/104, Prajit Apartments, Umra Road, Surat 395 001

Ray, Debes (b.1936): Renowned Bengali novelist, short-story writer, editor and critic; has several published works to his credit including the highly acclaimed *Mafassali Brittanta* and *Tistaparer Brittanta*; recipient of Tapati Mukhopadhyay Award, Sahitya Akademi Award etc. Add: Apartment No. 7, FA - 9, Deshbandhu Nagar, Balmik Abasan, Calcutta 700 059

Roohi Majid. Teacher, poet and translator; studied poetry at the City Lit. and East Finchley Writing Workshops; writes both in English and Urdu and translates to and from English, Hindi and Urdu; has been widely published in UK magazines and anthologies; founder of London Multilingual Forum. Add: 7, Woodville Road, Golden's Green, London NW.11 9UH. U.K.

Sen, Bhaskar (b.1953) Poet and Artist; has two collections of poetry to his credit: held several solo shows and group shows in Mumbai and New Delhi. Add:.504, Aravali Appartments, Kaushambi, Ghaziabad 201010

Sengupta, Sutapa (b.1960) Bengali poet; teaches Bengali at a graduate college; has six collections of poetry to her credit; recipient of Krittibas Puraskar, Sukanto Puraskar; also awarded by the Department of Youth Welfare, Govt. of West Bengal. Add: Flat No. 5, 33, Bhupen Bose Avenue, Kolkata 700 004.

Sharma, Vinod (b.1944) Hindi poet and translator; has several collections of poetry to his credit; has translated works of Kafka, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Illinda Markova and fairy tales of Bulgaria, New Zealand, Germany, Russia, Yugoslavia, Rumania and Portugal; honoured by Peyo Yavaro Medal of National Museum of Literautre, Bulgaria, and winner of Sahityik Kriti Samman of Hindi Academy, Delhi etc. Add: 195D, MIG flats, Rajouri Garden, New Delhi 110 027.

Shivanath (b.1925) Dogri critic; translates from Dogri into English; has edited *Uttara Digest*. Add: B-505 Purvasha, Mayur Vihar, Phase – I, Delhi 110 091.

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Shiva Prakash, H.S. (b.1954) Well-known Kannada poet and playwright; winner of Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award etc.; translates from Kannada into English; was formerly Editor, *Indian Literature*. Add: Associate Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110 067.

Singh, Maheep (b.1930) Hindi fiction-writer and critic; also writes in Punjabi; retired as Reader, S.G.T.B. Khalsa College, Delhi; Editor of the Hindi quarterly *Sanchetna* since 1966; recipient of the Subramania Bharati Award for Literature by Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, Agra; Sahityakar Samman by Hindi Academy, Delhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar National Award etc. Add: H-108, Shivaji Park, Punjabi Bagh, New Delhi 110 026.

Singh, N.P. Indian English poet with two collections of poetry; translates both prose and poetry from Hindi into English; has worked in the area of post-war American fiction, especially Black Fiction. Add: C4-D/46-C, Janakpuri, New Delhi 110 058.

Sudhangsu A reputed painter; a graduate from the Government Art College, Kolkata, he has exhibited his paintings at Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and a few cities of Germany. Add: 98/4 S.N. Banerjee Road, Calcutta 700014

Swain, Rabindra K. (b.1960) Indian English poet with two collections of poems to his credit; translates from Oriya into English; associated with Jayanta Mahapatra's reputed poetry magazine *Chandrabhaga*; teaches at the Gopabandhu Academy of Administration, Chandrasekharpur, Bhubaneswar 751 023.

V.K.N. (V.K. Narayanan Kutty Nair) (b.1932-d.1904) Eminent Malayalam fiction-writer; has several published works to his credit the most important being *Payyan Kathakal*, *Aarohanam* (translated by himself in English as *Bovine Bugles*), *Pitamahan*, *Adhikaram*, *Chitrakeralam* etc.; recipient of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Sahitya Akademi Award, Harmony Award and several others. Address of his legal heir: Thiruvilwamala 680588, Thrissur Dist., Kerala.

Vyas, Abhijit. Upcoming Gujarati poet. Add: Gulab Kunj, Off Ranjit Memorial, Jamnagar 361 001